

# SIGHT & SOUND

INTERNATIONAL FILM QUARTERLY SUMMER 1990 · £2.00 · \$3.95



Blocked writers  
Prague/Budapest  
Michael Powell  
Bette Davis

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# SIGHT & SOUND

INTERNATIONAL FILM QUARTERLY

SUMMER 1990

VOLUME 59 No 3



**Editor:** Penelope Houston

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**Publications Manager:** John Smoker

SIGHT AND SOUND is an independent critical magazine sponsored and published by the British Film Institute. It is not an organ for the expression of official BFI policy, signed articles represent the views of their authors.



On the cover: Christine Edzard's 'The Fool': print seller Michael Medwin. Photo: Daniel Meadows.

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# IN THE PICTURE

## FEIFFER

### Resnais and an 'elderly has-been cartoonist'

Jules Feiffer and Alain Resnais are two names that do not normally go together.

Feiffer is the celebrated American cartoonist whose syndicated strip explores attitudes of love and sex, issues of headlines and politics, and the certainty of growing older and feeling depressed about the state of things. He has also written plays and novels; and the occasional film: *Carnal Knowledge* (Mike Nichols, 1970), *Little Murders* (Alan Arkin, 1971), *Popeye* (Robert Altman, 1980). I think Resnais is one of the most brilliant film-makers of all time,' Feiffer says, 'yet a lot of his movies are so forbidding that you can't get at the core of them. The ones that work are remarkable, like *Last Year in Marienbad*. Others leave me out in the cold.'

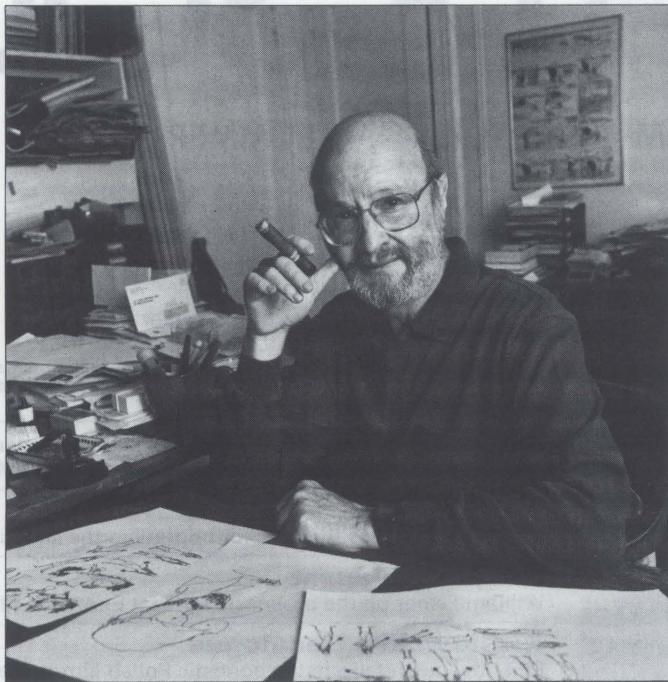
So, how could they ever collaborate on a movie? Feiffer's thoughts exactly, when Resnais telephoned him out of the blue from the hotel where he was staying in New York. Resnais' English is not very good; Feiffer speaks no French. Yet Feiffer found the formidable French film-maker 'pure and sweet' and discovered that he liked him immensely.

In Chicago, where he has been nurturing a production of his new play *Elliot Loves*, directed by Mike Nichols, Feiffer talked about *I Want to Go Home*, their film about an elderly has-been cartoonist.

'Resnais said that he was a fan of my cartoons, but that's not why he was coming to me. He liked my second novel, a book called *Ackroyd* (1979), about a kid who loves Sam Spade, so he becomes a private detective. No one has read that book, including my wife. Just like the French!'

Resnais said that he wanted to make an English-language film about America, to be shot in France. Did Feiffer have any ideas? Feiffer did not, but he liked the idea of going to Paris to toil at the project. 'I thought of this thing as "Operation Resnaiscam". I was going to get my family over to Paris, we'd have a good time, but this thing would fall through. I couldn't think of Resnais as being funny, or how we would fit together.'

Months passed. More vague, pleasant meetings in New York. One day Resnais phoned and said that plane tickets to Paris would be approved by the producer Marin Karmitz once Feiffer had come up with an actual story kernel. I came into



Jules Feiffer. Photo: William B. Winburn.

Resnais' room and said: 'Jerry Lewis'. A comedian who is a has-been in the United States. He goes to Paris and the French intellectuals make a big thing of him and the story goes from there. That's the only thing I knew about the French and Americans and how to bring them together—this odd business of the French loving what the Americans reject. Resnais liked the idea very much.'

Feiffer, wife and child flew off to Paris. Right away, Resnais informed Feiffer that he was having second thoughts about a Jerry Lewis type ('too close to somebody identifiable'). Feiffer had a back-up position: an elderly cartoonist who goes to Paris for an international exhibition where he is festooned with honours. The cartoonist is also attempting a reconciliation with his daughter, who has fled to Paris to study Flaubert. She thinks her father is a vulgarian. Her hero the professor (played in the film by Gérard Depardieu) turns out to be a fanatical admirer of her father's strip 'Hepp Cat'.

Although Feiffer is a friend of Adolph Green, it was Resnais who suggested Green, writer (with Betty Comden) of such vintage musicals as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band Wagon*, for the lead role. Green has recently done colourful small parts in films (*Simon, My Favourite Year*). 'But Adolph had, until this movie, maybe ten minutes on screen in his entire life, if you add them all together,' says Feiffer. They didn't bother to tell Green they were writing a film for him. 'I wanted to exploit him as a character before I presented it to him. I didn't want to deal

with Adolph, who might even say no. It helped enough that I could write a character who sounded like Adolph. It gave me a character instead of a type.'

Months later. Many trips back and forth to Paris. 'Resnais taught me something about how he works. He said the way he believes a movie should be made is that there are only one or two characters from whose point of view you are shooting. Everything has to be seen through their eyes. If they are offscreen, nothing happens. So you have to find a way to tell the story through the eyes of these major characters—in this case Adolph and the daughter. I don't think I agree with that, but I thought it was a wonderful way of working. It was good discipline, and I got a better script out of it.'

Filming began in France in autumn 1988. The director broke the hard news to Feiffer that for the first time he was not going to be welcome on a set. Resnais said it would make the cast nervous—but he meant himself. I was offended, but I knew he wasn't playing games with me. This was the way he worked.'

No matter. His script was fully realised, he says, with 'some minor changes and emendations for budgetary reasons'. Feiffer saw the finished film in Paris: 'To my amazement, it left me in tears. I was deeply moved by it. It was a very strange approach to my work because the pace is quite different. Americans would say it's all wrong. As far as I am concerned, it works. It is not Resnais, it is not Feiffer, it is itself. It comes together. You like the people and you care what happens to them. And it's funny.'

At the 1989 Venice festival *I Want to Go Home* prompted a standing ovation, and Feiffer received the Best Script award. The response has been largely downhill since then. The film has not been widely distributed; in the United States it remains 'unseen and unseeable', in Feiffer's disillusioned words. 'The why of it is a mystery to me. I'm as proud of this film as anything I've done. It's probably a better movie than *Popeye*. It's more personable, more approachable.'

Feiffer has had no better luck with Hollywood in general in the last ten years. During the 1980s he wrote four scripts for various producers, and worked for a long time with Volker Schlöndorff on a 'very funny' film about civil litigation/credit liability. That, and the other scripts, are in limbo or 'turnaround', a distinctly American quasimoribund condition. Perhaps directors know of his reputation for fiercely protecting the words of his scripts. 'The problem with me and Hollywood directors in most cases is that they can't do a script by me and pretend they are the auteur. They would have to settle for co-auteur, and that can be hard for a Hollywood ego to deal with.'

PAT MCGILLIGAN

## L'ATALANTE

### Vigo's intention

Cinema history is again about to be rewritten. We all think we have seen Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (now sadly slipped from its position in SIGHT AND SOUND's Top Ten in 1962), but in keeping with the current industry in restoring classics, a revelation is upon us. Two long-term devotees of the film, Pierre Philippe and Jean-Louis Bompont, have been entrusted by its original producer Gaumont to produce a print of superior quality to the current dupey mess in distribution, and most significantly a version closer to the director's original intentions.

But just what does that mean? Critics and audiences have now become wary of the restorer's zeal in adding scenes that never really worked in the first place. At least with *Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean was able to have his final say in the matter. But as is well known, Jean Vigo died long before a print of his film bearing the title *L'Atalante* could be seen by the public.

Due to his producer Jacques-Louis Nounez's lack of organising ability, filming in 1933 was delayed until November, when often appalling weather exacerbated Vigo's ill health. After shooting ended in February

1934, by which time a rough-cut had been assembled, Vigo took a holiday with family and friends. On his return to Paris, though, he was confined to bed, his illness diagnosed as rheumatic septicæmia. So how much influence did he have over the final shape of *L'Atalante*?

According to Bompont, Gaumont were so concerned about what they saw as Vigo's incompetence as an editor on *Zéro de conduite* that Louis Chavance was imposed on him. Vigo's relationship with Chavance was apparently amicable, and he invited him to attend the shooting. According to P. E. Salles Gomes' biography, Vigo only saw Chavance's work twice, the second time in the company of Nounez and potential exhibitors (though his presence was subsequently disputed by his assistant Albert Riera).

The disastrous reaction to this April screening put pressure on Nounez to make cuts and eventually capitulate to Gaumont's desire to 'sell' the film with the current hit song 'Le Chaland qui passe'. With sections of Maurice Jaubert's music replaced by the chanson, it was released under this title in September. Vigo died a few days after the end of a disastrous two-week run.

In Bompont's view, Vigo never had 'final cut', and his 'approval' of certain modifications was made under duress. Despite Gaumont's insistence at the time that much of the cut material was destroyed, over



*L'Atalante.*

the years various attempts have been made to reconstitute *L'Atalante* as seen at that historic preview. The result has been some very dubious prints, the most recent of which, as supplied to the film's new British distributor, Artificial Eye, ran only 81 minutes and was missing the celebrated 'insomnia' scene. (They now intend to release the new version.)

With the full support of Gaumont, Bompont and Phil-

ippe have been able to obtain rushes and missing footage from the Cinémathèque Française that had been zealously guarded by its late curator Henri Langlois. These include such moments referred to in Salles Gomes' book as Michel Simon's trick with a cigarette in his navel and Jean Dasté licking a huge piece of ice.

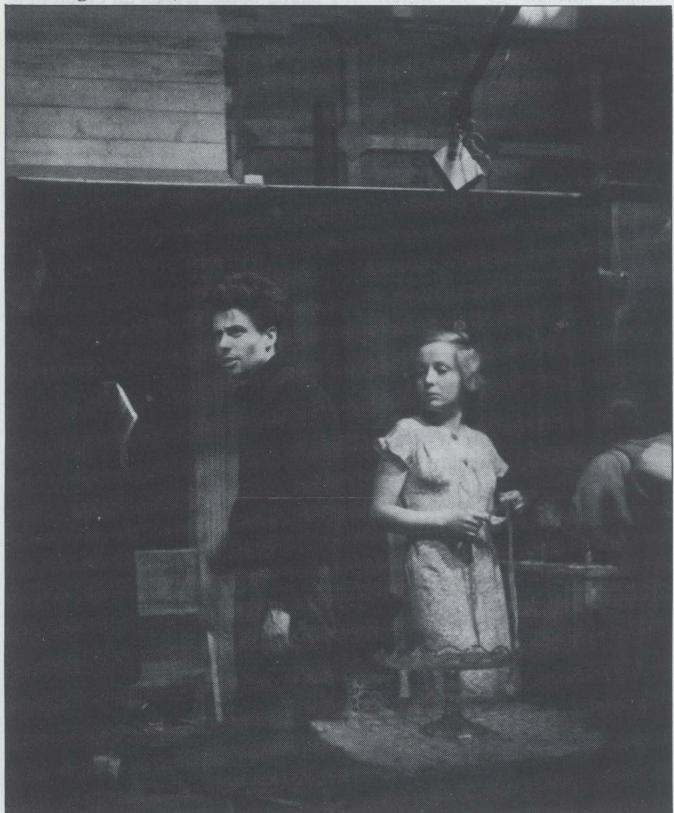
But most exciting has been the discovery of a superb print from 1934 of the original *L'Atalante* in the nitrate vaults of the National Film Archive at Berkhamsted. Running 89 minutes, this is the famous copy acquired by the Film Society (when it was reviewed favourably by Grierson) which was deposited with the Archive in 1942 for fear of destruction in the Blitz.

In order to remain faithful to the spirit of Vigo, the restorers have enlisted the support of his daughter Luce and all those still alive who worked on the film. Among them are Jean Dasté, the lyricist Charles Goldblatt and assistant director Pierre Merle. As their bible they have the original shooting script with handwritten emendations.

According to Philippe, elements of the surreal and the erotic were 'censored by the hand of Chavance'. In addition, this slightly longer cut will have 'a more dreamlike rhythm, a poetic dimension that is currently absent. Viewers of *L'Atalante* have always seen a ghost of a film.' Bompont is anxious to point out, however, that 'on no account are we taking any personal initiatives. Our aim is to serve Vigo.' If they serve him well, perhaps the film will once again be among the Top Ten.

DAVID J. THOMPSON

Jean Vigo (centre), with Jean Dasté and Dita Parlo.



## CARTAGENA Dominant Women

Cartagena's Film Festival was thirty years old this year, making it the senior event of its kind in Latin America. It was founded by Victor Nieto, who is still its director and rightly received a medal from the government and a standing ovation on the final night. It has never been easy for him to mount a fully international event in Colombia, a beautiful and cultured country riven by political strife and now in the process of a battle with the drug barons that can probably only be fought to a draw. But he has persisted nevertheless, and taken advantage of the prime factor in his favour—the old Spanish colonial town itself, which must be one of the most spectacular sites for a film festival in the world.

He has seen the event develop from a show-business jamboree, visited by stars such as Marlon Brando, who made *Quiemada* hereabouts with Pontecorvo, to a more serious if perhaps less festive programme which mounts the only Latin-American competition on the continent. But, even with the cachet of a unique competition to its name, the festival faces an uncertain future, since the government gives it very little help and would clearly prefer it to be sited in the capital, Bogota.

The main problem, however, remains the political situation and thus the lack of tourists. Troops were everywhere on the first night of the festival, not because of the event itself but because a presidential candidate

was visiting the city. And later in the week, the assassination on an ordinary internal flight of one of the leading candidates (by a man who managed to get a machine gun on to the plane) lent further credence to the fact that the country's tourist board has a virtually impossible task in attempting to entice people from abroad to the festival, or anywhere else.

In these circumstances, one tends to view a series of melodramatic Latin-American films in a new light, as art imitating life rather than reflecting it in a highly coloured version. Though it was possible to wonder why the international jury favoured Ecuador's *La Tigra* with the top prize.

The film, about three women who dominate a small community largely through steamy sexual manipulation, is only Ecuador's second feature, but directed by Camilo Luzuriaga with some panache. Fundamentally more interesting, at least in subject matter, was the Colombian entry—*Maria Cano*, a biographical study of the country's first woman Socialist leader, who was rebellious enough in the 1920s and 30s to inspire fathers to tell their recalcitrant daughters to this day: 'Who do you think you are—*Maria Cano*?'

Camila Loboguerrero's first feature looks excellent, and has an undoubted sense of its period. But it has more difficulty explaining Cano's personal magnetism than tracing her fall from grace due largely to political perfidy. The film deservedly won a prize for its cinematography, leaving the best director award to Paul Leduc for the Spanish-Cuban *Barroco*, a film virtually without dialogue that relies on some stunning images to summon up Alejo Carpentier's novel *Concierto Barroco*.

This was the most applauded prize, both in the press and at the festival's closing ceremony. But it is not a film one would recommend to the impatient, even though its matching of music from Vivaldi and Schubert through to flamenco and rock 'n' roll with its journey through Mexico, Cuba and Spain has some fascination.

What the festival now needs is the money to attract more European and American interest and the political stability without which its best laid plans are unlikely to come to fruition. And it was a pity for the home team that Colombia's outstanding film of the year, *Rodrigo D*, a debut by Victor Gaviria, could not be screened because of its imminent appearance as the first Colombian film in competition at Cannes.

DEREK MALCOLM



*Full Moon in New York.*

## HONG KONG

### Local heroes—and heroines

The standout feature of the 14th Hong Kong Festival was the quality of the movies from Hong Kong itself. The massacre in Tiananmen Square has concentrated the minds of the colony's leading film-makers, forcing them to confront the implications of 1997, and to question their own future place in the Chinese scheme of things. A new sense of purpose is imparting a backbone to the local cinema that it has too often lacked.

After a shaky start, set in London in 1973, Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* rapidly finds a proper tone as the story shifts to Asia. Semi-autobiographical, it is a poetic exploration of the emotional and cultural gap between an English-educated Hong Kong girl and her Japanese mother, both *déplacées* and in search of their roots. The action ranges widely in place and time from the 1940s to the 70s, with scenes set in Manchuria, Macao, Canton and Japan, and the director employs a brilliantly modulated colour palette to provide a tonal code for the film's swiftly changing moods.

The mother finally makes the trip back to her birthplace, but finds that she no longer relates to Japanese values. The lifeline has been too long severed and those with whom she ought to be as one have become strangers. In this beautiful and moving film, it is not hard to see a metaphor for another kind of homecoming seven years down the road.

Some found Allen Fong's

*Dancing Bull* a comparatively trivial work, redeemed only by the last scenes, which incorporate a response to Tiananmen Square. But this is to miss the point. The title ought to have given the clue, even if the early scene of Cora Miao caught up in a local protest against *The Last Temptation of Christ* does not. The model is Martin Scorsese, though not really the Scorsese of *Raging Bull*. In the story of a dancer and a choreographer who love but cannot live together and whose careers go in different directions, Allen Fong has virtually recreated *New York, New York* amid the skyscrapers of Kowloon.

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Some found Allen Fong's

glamorous as a fashion ad, but seen through the eyes of women from the three Chinas: Maggie Cheung (who also stars in *Song of the Exile* and *Farewell, China*) from Hong Kong, Sylvia Chang from Taiwan and Siqin Gaowa from the Mainland.

The rather loose structure eventually begins to work, and by the last scene, as the three women celebrate their common heritage on the roof of a Manhattan skyscraper, with the snow setting in and an empty champagne bottle left as an emblem of friendship and solidarity, the film achieves the poetic touch for which it has been striving.

Sylvia Chang also appears in an entirely different role in *Queen of Temple Street* as a brothel-keeper. This second film of Lawrence Ah Mon is so frank in language and incident that it audibly astonished even Hong Kong's blasé audiences at the festival's opening night. It concerns a mother's quest to save her daughter from following in her own footsteps, and if the end settles for an unpersuasive fairytale reconciliation, the graphic scenes of brothel life are as realistic as anything since Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame*.

Shu Kei's *Sunless Days*, already noted from Berlin, is a searing documentary not only on Tiananmen Square and immediate reactions in Hong Kong to the tragedy, but on the longer-term implications for Chinese people who must decide now on their strategy for 1997. Shu Kei juggles his material—the voice of Chai Ling, the sound of jackboots, the testimony of witnesses—to create a powerful statement of concern for the future of the colony. But he goes

beyond this. By narrowing the focus down to his own family, some of whom have joined the Chinese diaspora, he contrives simultaneously to address the fraught question of what makes a Chinese Chinese.

China itself, which only a few years ago dominated the Hong Kong festival, sent a blatantly derivative piece in Teng Wenji's *The Ballad of Yellow River*, combining the ethnic dances of *Yellow Earth* and the violence of *Red Sorghum*. But it also sent *Black Snow*, a powerful drama by Xie Fei, former director of the Beijing Film Academy. An uncompromising study of the decline, murder and lonely death of an ex-convict, it paints a wintry portrait of a society utterly unable to accommodate mavericks. Superbly acted by Jian Wen, it is like a solemn requiem for all who have ever been cut down in their prime.

ALAN STANBROOK

## SAVING GRACE

### Mackendrick at Quimper

Quimper, in the far west of Brittany, enjoys the reputation of hosting, each April, one of the friendliest and most informal of film festivals. Not least of the pleasures on offer is some quirkily eclectic programming—for which the festival's overall title, 'Rencontres Art et Cinéma', allows ample scope. A well-established link with the new Soviet cinema ('Quimpéro-troika', as a publicity handout put it) forms a central thread—but around it there clusters each year an unpredictable range of elements.

So this year Quimper also featured an *hommage* to the artist-film-maker Christian Boltanski; a five-film grab-bag (two Bonds, two Pythons, and Leland's *Wish You Were Here*) rather disconcertingly labelled *humour anglais*; and the winners of a popularity poll among local schoolchildren: *Honky Tonk Man* and *Cinema Paradiso*. Plus a retrospective of the work of Alexander Mackendrick.

This last item was a notable event on two counts. Remarkably, it was the first-ever complete retrospective of Mackendrick's films as director. (The three previous tributes, in 1971 at the NFT, 1978 at Edinburgh and 1986 at Telluride, lacked a title or two.) And, even more exceptionally, it was attended by the director himself, making his first trip across the Atlantic in ten years.

Since he quit directing in the late 1960s, Mackendrick has lived in Los Angeles, teaching film at the California Institute of the Arts. In recent years

emphysema has slowed him down, though he still teaches three days a week. But long-distance travel poses problems, and he arrived at the festival in a wheelchair, to his own evident irritation.

For all his physical frailty, though, Mackendrick remains verbally as sharp as ever. In two public discussions, with Michel Ciment and Philippe Pilard respectively, he fielded questions with dry Scots wit. Nor was he above teasing the audience with his own mortality, reminding them that Katie Johnson, following her triumph as Mrs Wilberforce in *The Ladykillers*, had died at the age of 78—'which is about my age now'.

Auteurist reverence has never gone down well with Mackendrick, whose attitude to his own work ranges from mild disapprovement to—in the case of his last and least-known film, *Don't Make Waves*—virulent antipathy. ('I wish they'd get hold of all the prints and burn them.') Treating the whole idea of an *hommage* with polite scepticism, he preferred when possible to deflect praise for any achievement on to his cast or crew. 'Casting is nine-tenths of the job,' he told Michel Ciment. 'Once you've cast, you follow the actor's impulses and instincts.'

He also paid tribute to the collaborative spirit of Ealing, recalling how Charles Crichton had saved *Whisky Galore* from disaster by re-editing it from

scratch, without payment or credit. 'Though of course I then did second unit for him for years. But I've experienced that kind of sharing, of generosity, only two or three times in my life, and once was at Ealing.' A pause, before adding meaningfully, 'But never in California.'

Perhaps surprisingly, since he trained as an artist, it's the technical detail of film-making that has always enthralled Mackendrick, and he launched with gusto into an account of how he devised the slopping, burbling 'voice' of the apparatus in *The Man in the White Suit*. Having started out with a jazz record (Red Nichols and his Five Pennies), 'I got the sound department to mark on a huge piece of graph paper every drum beat, every note of the clarinet and bass. So then they knew that I was mad. But we replaced the notes with sound effects—such as blowing a trumpet underwater, which sounds very vulgar and very funny. Then we reconstituted the whole thing on five tracks and mixed them—with the results that you know. I think there are too few directors who really love the soundtrack, and the imaginative use of sound.'

As a rule, Mackendrick steers clear of discussing the significance of his films. 'You become self-conscious, and that's fatal. I leave over-interpretation to the critics.' On this occasion, though, reacting to the suggestion that

his comedies were 'based on realism', he offered an alternative angle. 'Not realism, no—but truth, in a way. I have a strong feeling about comedy, that the only jokes worth making are those which would be unbearable unless you make them as jokes. To be frivolous about trivial things is childish—but to make fun of the things that really scare you, that if you like is the basis of truth in comedy. You see, I believe laughter to be not just a grace, but the saving grace of mankind.'

PHILIP KEMP

## IMAGFIC 90

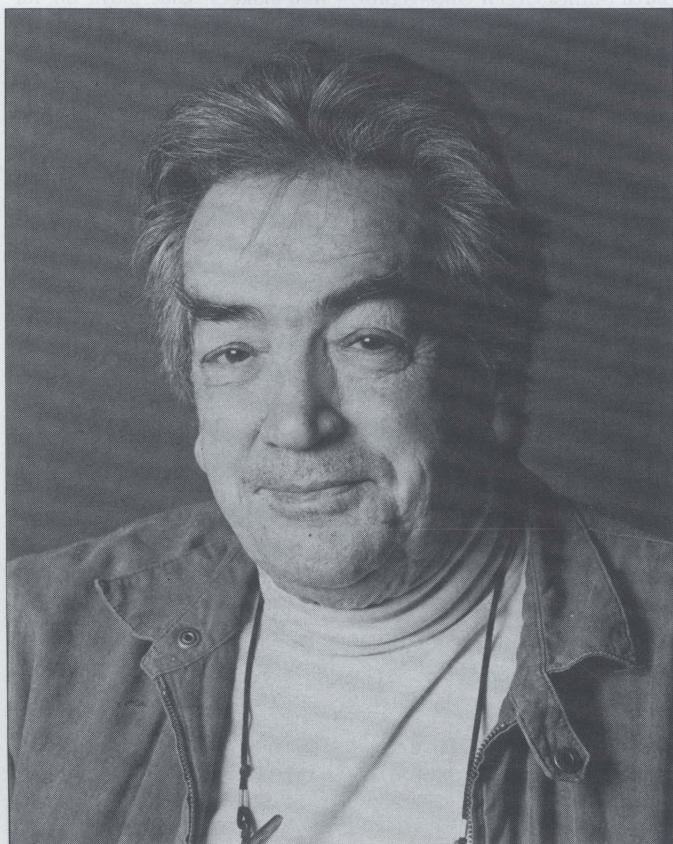
### Madrid's festival of 'imaginary films'

The big film festivals thunder on, giant vacuum cleaners sucking up the year's supply of often grubby celluloid. Smaller festivals have to carve out corners for themselves, which the Madrid festival Imagfic has now been doing for eleven years. 'A specialised event whose main objective is the promotion of imaginary films,' it announces itself. Imaginary films? What a splendid idea. What they actually mean is 'those films avoiding realism'—horror, science fiction, thrillers, etc.

There's more than this to Imagfic: retrospectives of Hou Hsiao-hsien, the year's obligatory festival flavour, of Borowczyk and Albert Lamorisse; an assortment of new European films, from Beineix to Michael Winner. Altogether, almost eighty films, neatly kept under one roof in a newly refurbished multiscreen cinema. The public comes, though not it seems in droves: mostly men, mostly youngish, lining up rather glumly for *Tremors*, in which giant prehistoric serpents go on the rampage.

It's the competition section that rather lets this enthusiastic festival down. It musters Jodorowsky's *Santa Sangre*, the new American thriller *Blue Steel*, and rather too many mainly minor oddities. *The Girl in a Swing*, from the novel by Richard Adams, is a hesitant and long-winded tale of a doomed marriage, directed by Gordon Hessler in a style of muffled melodramatics. *The Terracotta Warrior*, from Hong Kong, has one splendid idea, of the terracotta army reassembling itself and riding out to do battle on a modern airfield, but leaves it lying mainly on the runway. *Nosferatu a Venezia*, directed by Augusto Caminino, brings Klaus Kinski drifting out of the Venetian lagoon, in some fine, old-fashioned, misty images, before he settles down to

Alexander Mackendrick.



# IN THE PICTURE

the usual stumping and threatening. An interestingly chosen jury, including Christopher Lee, Dominique Deruddere and Yuri Khodjaev, director of the Moscow Festival, might not have minded if some of these had remained imaginary.

Rita Sonleva, who runs Imagic with tireless amiability, in any case has her sights set on broader horizons: for 1992, she is already planning a major celebration of European cinema.

PENELOPE HOUSTON

## ETNA & ECOLOGY

### Straub/Huillet's 'Empedocles'

The high point of April's Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet retrospective at the Goethe Institute in London was the appearance of the film-makers themselves and the British premiere of their most recent feature, *The Death of Empedocles*. This is a characteristically rigorous rendition of the first of Friedrich Hölderlin's three versions of an unfinished blank-verse tragedy about the Greek philosopher Empedocles.

The film received a fiery reception at the 1986 Berlin film festival. At a subsequent press conference Straub was asked why he and Huillet had not simply made a record or a radio play. The director countered by lambasting much modern cinema as pornography and the spiritual equivalent of industrial effluent. Would similar scenes disturb the customary calm and dignity of the Goethe Institute?

Emphatically not. Although

the press ignored the event, the audience was large and for the most part stayed the Hölderlin course to take part in a well-informed debate with the filmmakers. *Empedocles* itself turned out to be considerably less daunting than the advance reports; although it is hard to imagine it even half-filling, say, the Camden Plaza for a week—which is why, perhaps, Andi Engel, Straub/Huillet's longtime champion, has not taken it on.

Jonathan Rosenbaum has called *Empedocles* a 'voluptuous exploration of German's various tonalities that virtually reinvents the language'. The ambient sounds of nature play a key role in the drama (direct sound is used throughout), and Rosenbaum accurately compares the film to 'an opera or oratorio that uses the chance contributions of wind, insects, birds, plants, clouds and sun as orchestral accompaniment' (*Chicago Reader*, 2 December 1988).

The film was shot on the lush lower slopes of Mount Etna, and not since the park scenes in *Blowup* has the wind in the trees seemed quite so tangible. Two of Empedocles' valedictory speeches are delivered against long-held shots of the volcano across whose face clouds pass. The combined effect of sound and image produces one of Straub/Huillet's finest moments. The original *Empedocles* was conceived as a response to the French Revolution; but as their subtitle indicates—'When the Earth Shines Green Once Again for You'—the film-makers have discovered in it a timely ecological text.

In the editing phase we work to  $\frac{1}{24}$ th of a second, i.e. a single

frame, and to half that in the case of the soundtrack,' Huillet said. 'And don't believe it is easier to edit when you have long-held shots: you have to be even more precise than in the short ones. We would never accept the practice of using the sound from one take with the image from another—not even one word.'

'It was torture to decide which takes to use, because we had at least four good ones of every shot. Since the light was very fluid and changeable, we always did another take after the first good one in case the laboratories destroyed it in some way. Then the cameraman or soundman would usually say something that worried us, so we'd go on till we got two more good ones.'

'Fortunately, the actors were very well prepared, because we had worked with them on the text for 18 months before shooting. So in the end we made four versions of the film, with the same shots but different takes, so you get different light, different sounds, and even the actors are different according to whether the sun is shining in their faces or the wind is blowing.' And what of the actors' non-naturalistic delivery? 'We tried for six months for some kind of *enjambement*', Straub said, 'but it just did not work. Hölderlin wrote in verse, and if you try to hide that, the text makes no sense.'

Who nowadays sees Straub/Huillet's work? Television, the film-makers said, plays an important role. 'You have to build the finances from different funders over two, three, maybe four years,' Huillet said. 'We are not naive,' Straub added, 'we know

that in the present state of distribution and exhibition such films as ours will have only a very small audience in the "communal" cinemas. But when *Moses and Aaron* was shown on television, even at 11 at night, it got almost two million viewers. *Empedocles* was shown at 11.30 p.m. and that got 800,000.

'But it's really scandalous that when a film like this is shown for the first time in Britain there's nothing about it in the press. I say this not on our account but on Hölderlin's. There's so much talk about Europe at the moment—but what is Europe without Hölderlin? Perhaps only 300 more people would have come, and perhaps 100 of them would have walked out, but in a society which claims to be democratic people should at least have the right to know such films exist, and to put up with them!'

JULIAN PETLEY

## MEDIA PROGRAMME

### Reasons to be cheerful?

A cinema dying (if not dead) on its feet, a television industry doubting its ability to survive, let alone produce 'quality' work—all appears doom and gloom for the British producer. Yet within the next couple of years independent European cinema and programme-making could be far more flourishing and productive than ever before. All the omens look good—with one exception. That one, unfortunately, and as so often, is the attitude of the British Government (and to some extent of British producers themselves).

The optimism stems from the success of the European Commission's MEDIA Programme. The main aim of the Programme is to establish a viable and eventually self-supporting infrastructure for European production. That its achievements, despite its short existence, are substantial became obvious during MEDIA's presentation at this year's MIP-TV—which also saw the launch of their latest project, EVE (Espace Vidéo Européen).

EVE aims to do for video-cassette distribution what the European Film Distribution Office (EFDO) is doing for cinema. EFDO's most remarkable accomplishment, perhaps, is in demonstrating what no one believed—that European art-house movies (British included) can be commercially successful. The problem hitherto, it seems, was simply that no one ever got to see them. Now nearly 5 million tickets have been sold for the 25 films so far assisted. In future, EFDO plans to cover



# IN THE PICTURE

medium-budget as well as low-budget productions, and to increase the number of films it helps to around 100 per year. EAVE will also work in close co-operation with two other MEDIA projects concerned with promotion and distribution: BABEL, the television subtitling and dubbing support fund, and EURO-AIM.

The most visible of the schemes, EURO-AIM provides an umbrella for independent producers at the major trade fairs, and is now the largest client at MIP-TV. This has resulted in considerable market activity—some 2,000 hours of programming sold, with a turnover of around 20m ECU. Links with non-EEC and East European countries are being forged, and there are plans to enter the lion's den and actively play the North American and Japanese markets.

Less glamorous, but equally vital, is EURO-AIM's work in developing its various permanent services. So far two databases are in operation—one profiling production companies, the other detailing productions—and a third on distributors and buyers is in preparation. Access is to be decentralised, and it's also hoped more use will be made of EURO-AIM's consultants, who are now available throughout the year and not just at the markets. But perhaps the most stimulating development is the creation of a co-production 'Grand Café' to put interested parties in contact with each other.

Bringing people together in co-operative enterprises is central to MEDIA's philosophy—as is apparent in the work of CARTOON, the European Animated Film Association. Among its many imaginative solutions to the industry's problems is the setting-up of Studio Networks. So far two, EVA and EUROTOONS, are in operation, but a further seven groups—covering some 80 studios—are expected to start up this year.

Another effective move has been the inauguration of 'Cartoon Forum', a twice-yearly gathering of distributors, television channels and animation producers to facilitate the organisation of joint ventures as well as the buying and selling of product. Other objectives include developing links with equipment manufacturers, harmonising work methods, producing pilots, instituting a vocational training scheme (to create an estimated 500 jobs) and establishing an effective database.

The work of the European Script Fund has helped immeasurably in creating the right environment for production and, by focusing on script development and pre-production, in establishing the concept of development throughout Europe.

Having granted over 100 loans in its first year, the Fund plans to extend its support by nursing projects through to production.

In this it will work in close co-operation with MEDIA's entrepreneurial training programme, EAVE, which is developing a flourishing network of successful trans-European producers through the newly inaugurated EAVE Club. Ten of the scheme's first-year intake of 19 projects are in production—two already in distribution—with several of this year's batch close on their heels. Besides various publishing plans, EAVE is also strengthening its ties with EURO-AIM and other MEDIA projects, such as the proposed complementary European Business School.

Complementarity is a key element in the Programme, each project designed to dovetail with the activities of its confreres. Thus the MEDIA Investment Club for Advanced Technologies is not only involved in the development of HDRV, but is actively engaged in training projects and other schemes to boost both computer and traditional animation—such as the new MA in Synthesised Images and Computer Animation. And proposals such as MEDIA VENTURE and MEDIA GUARANTEE are aimed at closing the present gap in MEDIA's intervention by facilitating venture capital investment in productions—and incidentally moving the programme decisively out of its low-budget limitations.

All of which may sound ridiculously positive and optimistic. And so it is—but only because all these plans are dependent on the Programme getting the go-ahead to move from its pilot or experimental phase to full status as an EC project. For this it needs the *unanimous* backing of the European Parliament's Council of Ministers. Most of the Twelve are enthusiastic—as last October's Audio-Visual Assises showed—and while some countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have had their doubts, these seem to be fading as MEDIA proves itself.

This just leaves the British Government, which seems unable to recognise a good thing when it sees one, and is so far showing no interest in providing the necessary support. The commitment needed is minimal, but vital. Without it, all these burgeoning activities will be stopped in their tracks next October. Write to the Government or to your MP. Or both.

THERESA FITZGERALD

STOP PRESS: At Mrs Thatcher's Downing Street seminar of 15 June, the Government agreed to 'continue discussions in Europe on how best to support the film production industry, notably through the MEDIA programme'.

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# FALSE STARTS

JAMES PARK ARGUES THAT THE PROBLEMS FOR  
BRITISH FILMS START WITH THE SCRIPT



*Stormy Monday.*



*Chicago Joe and the Showgirl.*



*The Krays.*

The old line that a poem is never finished, only abandoned, applies also to film. There's no limit to how far you can alter, change or improve a film. But the first draft is probably the area where the writer does impose a large amount of the finished shape of the film. The work you do after that is detailed, rather than structural. In my experience on seven scripts that have gone to filming stage, there has not been a major rethink, going back to square one.

**WILLIAM BOYD**  
(*Stars and Bars, Mister Johnson, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*)

The ideal situation is that a director is going to come in, respect your work, respect your intentions, agree with them, and give it wings, make it better.

**MAGGIE BROOKS**  
(*Loose Connections, Heavenly Deceptions*)

**B**ritish scripts are not all that wonderful,' remarks the writers' agent Julian Friedman, 'and they're certainly not as wonderful as most people think they are.' The weakness of their scripts does, in fact, explain the failure of most recent British attempts at popular cinema. People blame over-emphatic directing or uncertain performances, but much of what is seen as bad acting or bad directing is actually bad writing. And they ask how anything could be seriously wrong with the *writing* in a country that has always prided itself on its literary and theatrical tradition, even though screenwriting is about writing images that trigger emotions, and has little to do with novel-writing or playwriting. The script is so important that a director who starts work without a good one is like a building site foreman without an architect's plan; bound to put everything in the wrong place.

Nobody could say that the ideas behind recent British movies lacked dramatic potential: *Scandal*, about a sex romp that brought down a government; *Chicago Joe and the Showgirl*, about two movie-crazed teenagers rampaging through wartime England; *Stormy Monday*, about a jazz-club owner fighting off predatory American property developers; *For Queen and Country*, about a black soldier who returns from the Falklands to racist taunts on a demoralised, drug-infested London council estate; *Paris by Night*, about a European politician who accidentally kills the man who is blackmailing her; *The Krays*, about two gangster twins terrorising London. But even if the marketing people always seem to know what these movies should have been about, all too often the audience leaves the cinema wondering why anyone bothered.

Director, cameraman, actors and members of the prop department may have laboured to bring each of these projects to life, but dud scripts doomed them from day one of shooting. As a result, the characters don't convince, the situations don't engage the imagination and the whole experience is neither particularly interesting nor particularly stirring. To invest such large sums of money in such poorly structured films is an appalling waste of resources. Particularly when you think how much it costs to make a movie, and how proportionately little it takes to get the script right.

'The main point to get through to people,' remarks Shawn Slovo, 'is that you have to rewrite it and rewrite it and rewrite it.' But people don't realise how much work is involved in bringing a script to a state of readiness. The screenwriter Philip Ridley seems proud to have taken only two weeks to write the script for *The Krays*. His mistake is to think it doesn't show. Scene by scene the movie is sometimes interesting, and I'm sure it makes a wonderful trailer. But there isn't enough coherence between the scenes to involve the audi-

ence in what's happening, or to bring the film into contact with those elements in the story that give it such a wide hold on the public imagination. And at every point when there is an important argument to get across, or a crucial emotional confrontation to be presented, the actors are given speeches that have them declaiming to camera as if they were on stage at the Royal Court.

The makers of such pictures don't seem to have asked themselves the crucial question: will we care about the characters and empathise with their experiences? Again and again, the people at the centre of the story are so casually introduced and their emotional trajectory so loosely explored, that there's no hope anyone will feel their way inside their feelings. It's a rare script that, like Shelagh Delaney's *Dance with a Stranger* or Shawn Slovo's *A World Apart*, injects an emotional charge into every scene and doesn't let its audience go until the final frame. Too often you feel that even the person who wrote the script didn't really care about the story. 'It sounds facile,' says Slovo, 'but you have got to really care and you have got to know what you are saying.'

The writers of too many recent British films seem to stand outside their characters, clinging to the belief that the clever intellectual connections they make between scenes, or the significance of the message they think they're espousing, will mean something to an audience. 'I want to make films that make people think,' said Hanif Kureishi during the filming of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, 'films that are shocking in the best sense of the word. I like the idea of a film being like a puzzle you work out in your own way.' Kureishi might think he's flattering the audience, but his refusal to put into his second film the degree of work that unified the diverse strands of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, is simple smugness.

Any sensible person would want to avoid the sort of trouble that's involved in developing a workable script, but that doesn't mean writers should be allowed to get away with it. Development is a time-consuming, headbashing process, where the architecture so lovingly constructed must be repeatedly demolished and reassembled until it finally finds a form that satisfies. Out of order must come chaos, again and again, until a structure is found that resonates with emotions and meanings.

So much material has to be worked through and refined that no one can expect to get it right on the first foray. That initial draft is an attempt to organise the structural line of the narrative, define the characters and outline the film's emotional shape. It rarely has the internal connections and the tight coherence of a finished script. Subsequent drafts tighten this loose assembly, so that each scene develops the film's emotional arc. The successive drafts should take those working on the script deeper into the dreams of the characters

and the inner pulse of the story. It's a protracted business, like a psychotherapeutic encounter, in which insight is applied to raw emotion. On too many recent British films, one doesn't feel the writers have even begun that painful journey. 'I can think,' says William Nicholson, 'of very few British films where the makers of the film have poured into it the kind of emotion that makes them vulnerable.'

That producers, who give every other sign of wanting their films to have them queuing outside cinemas from Kyoto to Milwaukee, so frequently fail to come to the starting blocks with competent scripts suggests either that there is something seriously wrong with screenwriting in Britain (and wherever else similar problems arise), or that producers simply don't understand what screenwriting is all about. In general, it's the writers who have been taking the blame. Professional screenwriters, it is said, are mostly hacks producing bloodless, if sometimes well-crafted, scripts; and producers would rather work with novelists and playwrights who have a Booker Prize nomination or two to prove the quality of their 'imaginings', even if they don't know a thing about cinema.

Some of this anxiety has been fed into proposals for screenwriting training, in the hope that Britain too can develop a core of professional, technically skilled but also imaginative writers of the calibre of Robert Towne, William Goldman or Richard Price. The courses at the National Film and Television School have been restructured, and the first edition of Screenwriters Studio took place this March, putting twelve aspiring writers through a week of workshops, seminars, talk-ins, tutorials and lectures.

On a less intensive level, thousands of producers, housewives, computer technicians and aspiring screenwriters have sought guidance from Robert McKee, an American who lectures on the complex tools with which screenwriters can stir the emotions of audiences, peddling his own version of those principles of dramatic structure that writers and philosophers have been trying to define ever since Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*.

McKee's detractors suggest that following his 'doctrine' can result only in synthetic, formulaic and lifeless scripts. They anticipate producers' slush-piles growing high with samey projects bearing the McKee imprimatur and suggest that many will come to echo Flannery O'Connor's sharp remarks on creative writing courses: 'Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them.' Admirers retort that any writer who takes McKee that seriously probably didn't have much talent to start with and argue that exposure to the course not only helps writers to focus on the problems of their scripts but also gives them an awareness of the craft which encourages them to be more ambitious. 'The idea that

I would like to carry on working with directors, but it will only take one really grim experience to make me change my mind. If I directed my own script I think it would never be as good as something directed by a really great director who was in tune with me. But it would be better than something done either by a great director who wasn't in tune with me or by a poor director.

**WILLIAM NICHOLSON**  
(*Shadowlands, Life Story*)

Film is also in my opinion a director's medium, not a writer's medium. The writer is there to facilitate the director to make what the director wants ... The script is the evolving of the film idea. That's when out of the chaos of ideas, thoughts, images tumbling over

thoughts, images tumbling over each other in the darkness, something comes—a form, a shape, a vision. And then the actual realising of it is sort of downhill all the way.

**MICHAEL HIRST**  
*(The Deceivers, Fools of Fortune)*

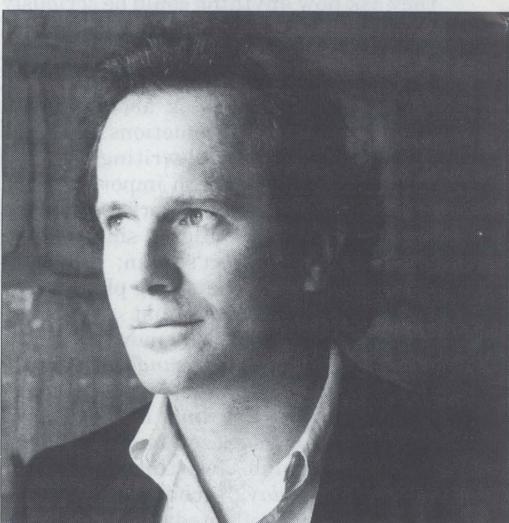
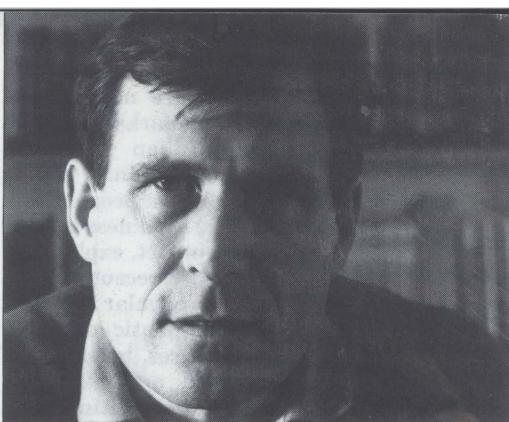
'McKee is a danger to original, creative thinking is utter nonsense,' says Julian Friedman.

But the problem with British (and European) scripts may have more to do with the production system than the technical skills of screenwriters. Those who write scripts cannot work in isolation, they need to know what's going to happen to their work and to be able to feed off the perceptions and attitudes of collaborators. Since a script can never be like a novel or a poem, where the writer's work is complete in itself, the energy that screenwriters bring to their work must depend on what the system asks, and allows, them to create. Screenwriters can only apply themselves to solving the problems presented by a project when they feel that, if the final script is good, it stands a reasonable chance of being made and that, if it *is* made, their contribution will not be subverted. Where those conditions don't apply, and too often they don't, then the creative juices won't begin to flow.

The demoralisation of writers starts with directors who see scripts as simply the springboard for *their* vision. Lip service is often paid to the idea that a good script is the essential precondition for a good movie, but decades of auteurist criticism have encouraged directors to promise, and their producers to believe, that the real work of making a film takes place on the floor. In fact all their camera virtuosity, their perceptivity about what's happening in a scene, their visual cadenzas and arpeggios, won't mean a thing unless there is a basic framework in place to organise the scenes, so that they involve the audience and carry the film forward.

There is a serious imbalance between the power of the writer and the director. Critical ideology gives the crown to the director, leaving many writers uncertain about their role in the process. Directors not only tend to have the stronger, more assertive personalities, but they also have the power to wreck the script on the floor. They often refuse to collaborate by being obtuse about the script or deliberately ask the writer the sort of questions that would make anyone who had spent months developing characters want to tear his script from the director's hands. 'They ask you to rewrite the script,' says Troy Kennedy Martin, 'simply because they don't understand it.'

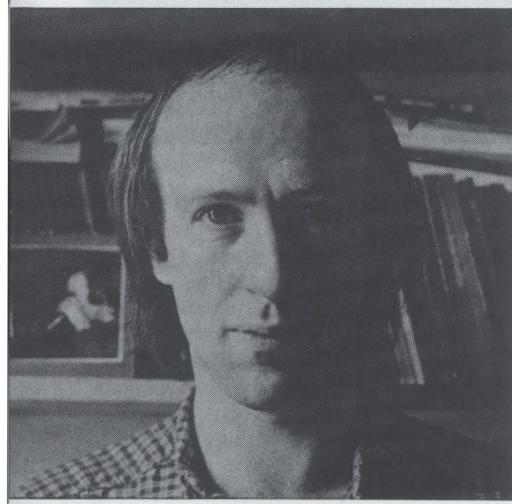
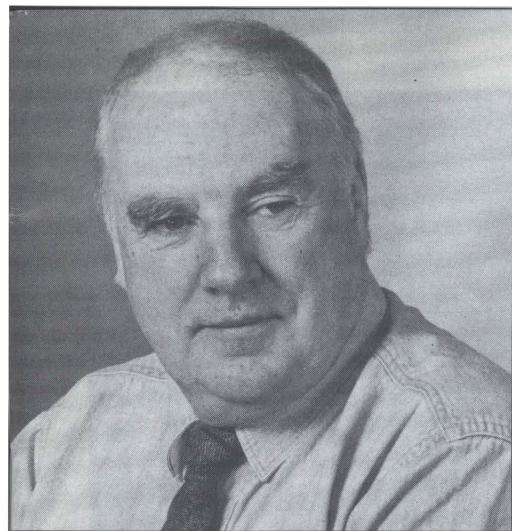
This lack of respect for writers and scripts has serious implications for the development process. For the most part writers start out accepting the need to respond to criticism and suggestions, but too often they find themselves in the presence of people whose attitude is wholly destructive; and a succession of such experiences can make them hyper-defensive. They can accept that something they have written isn't clear, and will welcome any contribution that helps to develop the intention of the script. What drives them to fury is being told to make changes by people



**From top:** William Nicholson,  
William Boyd, Michael Hirst.

who have made little attempt to engage with the script's deeper levels. 'There's this horrible moment,' says Maggie Brooks, 'when you realise you are with two nutcases who don't share any of your views about the work. And then it spirals somewhere, and you have them having these good ideas, deconstructing what you've constructed. That's the time to ring up and say that you are not going to do any more work on it.'

Writers become used to directors who can't take their work seriously, and think it's okay to get together with a friend and rewrite the script, ignoring much of the work that has already been done. William Nicholson's insistence that he be trusted to get the script right could be every writer's credo. 'I'll go on rewriting until the cows come home,' he says. 'I'll find an answer to your problem, but do not rewrite it yourselves and do not get in another writer. I'm



From top: Troy Kennedy Martin,  
David Pirie, Maggie Brooks.

failable. I'll get it wrong. Tell me and I'll fix it, but it's got to come through my head.'

Being paid for what they do can also be a problem. Although there is money available from the National Film Development Fund and the new European Script Fund for producers to fund first- and second-draft scripts, writers remain susceptible to exploitation by producers who think they should write treatments for free, and do further work on a script even when they have only been paid for two drafts. The line will often be that these rewrites are what's needed to land the requisite cash, which is anyway a rather demoralising process. 'If the thing is going to be made,' says David Pirie, 'there is no limit to the amount of work a screenwriter should put in. But as far as just allowing a succession of financiers, who may or may not put money into the project,

to make suggestions, that's hopeless.' A writer's optimism about a film's financing prospects, and desire to make a script come right, necessarily decreases with each unfinanced draft.

Alternatively, producers deceive themselves into believing that the script's problems can be sorted out after the money has been raised. This almost never happens. With the money in place, the urgency goes out of the development process, and having a film hurtling towards the starting gate doesn't encourage anyone to embrace the prospect of pulling the script to pieces and thinking through a new approach to the structure.

All the arguments that have gone on over the years about the respective role of writers and directors assume that somebody must come out on top, and that a work which isn't dominated by the mind of a single individual isn't worth anything very much. A recent edition of the *South Bank Show*, about the collaboration between David Lean and Robert Bolt on a film version of Conrad's *Nostromo*, showed the two veterans working together amicably and fruitfully on a script. Neither seemed constrained as to the area in which he could contribute, but Bolt clearly took responsibility for structure and characterisation while Lean thought through the possibilities and difficulties of individual scenes. Then suddenly, as if articulating some deep inner frustration, Lean declared his hope that one day a genius would come who could combine both functions, shaping images and structuring films.

Since the vast majority of writer-directors obviously don't rate against Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa or Andrei Tarkovsky, it's surely time to develop a creative ideology which embraces the fact that collaborative endeavour can produce films much more engaging and interesting than those of a solo auteur. Too many writer-directors see their movies as vehicles for self-expression or soap-boxing, shy away from those elements in cinema that communicate most directly to an audience. The result is that they produce one-dimensional work, made from scripts that haven't had a chance to breathe or grow, which nobody really wants to see. Only through collaborating with others, and learning to make films that contain contradiction and conflict, can these film-makers realise their own potential.

Collaboration must start from discord. Each collaborator brings to the project their own particular experiences, attitudes and ambitions. One is concerned with the structure that will motivate the succession of images, the other with ensuring that each moment has depth and resonance. It's only when both are willing to fight for their pitch, finding solutions that satisfy them both, that they will also find a way through to an audience. The forces must be evenly matched to some extent—writers who see themselves as simply handmaidsen

of a director's vision aren't likely to stand their ground. Great scripts are forged in battle, and it's not a battle that either should win. Where any party ends up with their boots on the head of the vanquished corpse, the result will be a film that is satisfactory only in parts. By putting their two minds together, writer and director can fight their way through to the emotional crux of the story and, in the creative tension between them, can be born ideas and images that go far beyond what either of them could have created on their own.

The more distinctive the writers or directors involved, the more difficult it is to establish that relationship of collaborative trust, and it may be that those sorts of relationships were easier to build within the kind of studio structure that effectively collapsed in Britain at the end of the 1940s. It's difficult now to imagine an Emeric Pressburger collaborating with a Michael Powell on a series of films over fifteen years.

Decades of director-worship have ensured that no one really takes seriously the idea that the films of The Archers were 'produced, directed and written' by two individuals. Powell was, after all, the more volatile character and the one who did the work on the floor. And didn't Powell complain that Pressburger wasn't really a film-maker, saying that 'even with a writer as clever and subtle as Emeric, I always had this continual battle with words.' But then commercial film-making isn't about visual poetry, it's about resolving the tension between the 'literary' and the visual aspects of any film. And while the task of directing a film starts with discussions on the first draft of a script, the act of writing it doesn't end until the final cut has come out of the dubbing theatre. Therefore, it means something when a writer and director take equal responsibility for a finished film.

'The screenwriter,' says Mark Peploe, 'should go on working on the film after the screenplay is finished, so as to keep the dialectic going with the director.' It would take an enormous shift in the perception of what writers do before producers would pay for them to be on a film up to the final cut, or directors tolerate their presence and interventions, but it's that sort of recognition of the writer's importance that is required. It was the forceful presence of the writer that accounted for such 1940s masterpieces as *Brief Encounter*, *The Third Man* or *A Canterbury Tale*, with their rhythmic structures, themes skilfully woven through the picture, echoes and resonances capturing the viewer in a sense of mystery and excitement.

Even with the more ambitious recent scripts from British writers, such as Mick Eaton's *Fellow Traveller* or Mark Peploe's *The Last Emperor*, one feels that their innovations were not followed through. With *The Last Emperor*, it is the grandeur of the decor and the *mise en scène* that prevents the connections made in Peploe's script from becoming



## *The Last Emperor*: too much mise en scène for the script?

fully apparent. Bertolucci has an astonishing eye for landscape and sense of scene construction, but it's significant that *The Conformist* acquired its shape in the editing room by Franco Arcalli, and none of his subsequent films has matched it for structural complexity. At the writing stage of *The Last Emperor*, Bertolucci initially dismissed the idea of using flashback, saying that it was old-fashioned. 'I had,' says Peploe, 'to spend a very hard two months, taking out the flashback, doing it straight, and I almost went mad. I couldn't do it.' Eventually Peploe got his way, but had there been more balance between writer and director, the film could arguably have been a much more exciting journey into its central character's psyche.

something changed, then they'll change it.'

For the production company, development is all money out, with no prospect of a return until the film is under way. Therefore those companies without access to a significant capital fund, which is most of them, will always be under pressure to get a film before the cameras. And where cash is available to finance the picture—thanks to the star, the director's reputation or the quality of the concept—no one is going to turn it down because the script isn't ready; the package could too easily fall apart, with the us distributor going bankrupt or the equity financiers suddenly finding they're not as rich as they were.

But if they don't get the script right, then British producers are never going to make films that strike chords with audiences around the world. It's a problem they are going to have to resolve—by developing a steadier nerve, holding on until they know a script is ready, and only then allowing anyone to call 'Action'. They have to take the long view, believing sufficiently in a film's potential for success to be confident that, if they can only work through to a good script, they'll be able to establish their finances on a more secure base.

For it's only by developing scripts that tap the fears and longings of their characters, and tell stories that lock into deep human emotions, that producers will resolve the creative and economic problems confronting British cinema. British films may have been too often constricted by realism, or inappropriately wordy, or afflicted by theatrical performances, but these flaws aren't simply rooted in the national culture. They reflect a refusal to appreciate how much it takes to develop a strong script. If British movies are ever going to be passionate, meaningful experiences, rather than flaccid records of historical events or half-hearted imitations of American genres, then producers will have to learn how to get writers and directors working together.

The writer has to gain the director's trust. That requires a lot of patience, a lot of toughness. You have to be able to rewrite things time and time again. You have to come out of it at the other end and not break down. So you really have to get his trust. But with some directors you're not going to get it and there's nothing you can do.

**TROY KENNEDY MARTIN**  
(Edge of Darkness, Troppo)

I feel a chill of fear sometimes when I watch American films, thinking how much work has gone into the script. Film is about taking millions and millions of permutations on

and millions of permutations on what a character can do and trying to get a ballpark of the best 20.

When the ending works, you know that it has probably been done 70 times.

**DAVID PIRIE**  
**(Rainy Day Women, Never Come Back)**

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# PRAGUE / BUDAPEST

WILLIAM FISHER LOOKS AT THE CHANGING FILM  
INDUSTRIES OF EASTERN EUROPE



Karel Kachyna's *The Ear*, banned since 1968, shown at Cannes.

You'd think they would have better things to think about these days in Czechoslovakia than movies. They do. 'With all the changes going on here, our studio heads and industry decision-makers just don't have time to scrutinise projects the way they used to,' says Czech director Karel Kachyna. 'And that's OK by me.'

Kachyna, now in his 60s, was part of the generation of the Czech New Wave—the directors who came of age in the 1960s along with the notion of 'socialism with a human face', the slogan of the Prague Spring. The group also included Milos Forman, Jiri Menzel, Ivan Passer and Jan Kadar. Only Kachyna and Menzel remained in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion. The others left to make their careers in the United States. Unlike other heroes from that period, however, Kachyna managed to stay in favour in his country, working consistently since the fall of the Dubcek government

associated with the flowering of Czech and Slovak culture in the 60s.

More than two decades later, Karel Kachyna is once again flying high internationally. His film *The Ear*, a nightmarish tale set during the Stalinist years, banned since 1968, appeared in competition at this year's Cannes Festival. His new film, *The Last Butterfly*, a French-British-Czech co-production, wrapped in December 1989—just as the pro-democracy movement toppled the former hardline government.

Perhaps more than any other development, Kachyna's 'rehabilitation' on two fronts is indicative of the changes taking place in East European cinema: the hard-won artistic achievements of the socialist past are being recuperated as the basis for a new, free cinema in a democratic Eastern Europe. Many of the names remain the same: Menzel, Jancso, Wajda. Only the circumstances have changed.

Eastern Europe and its cinema have

become fashionable in the West. You can't move through the commercial centre of Prague these days for all the German and Italian tourists. There are now some 600 joint ventures in operation between Hungary and the West. In Paris, Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue* attracted more viewers per theatre than *Steel Magnolias*. And no fewer than 11 East European or Soviet features and shorts were screened at Cannes this year. Together with Kachyna's film, most well-received among them was Ryszard Bugajski's *The Interrogation*. Like *The Ear*, the Polish film dates from 1968. It's no coincidence.

Some of the most astute observers of Eastern Europe have argued that political repression was instrumental in creating the region's culture. Of course, these observers were always careful to distinguish this 'culture' from its official, lifeless counterpart—just as they referred to the régime as 'actually existing' socialism to distinguish it from some sort of imagined ideal socialism.

That repression gave rise to what they termed an 'oppositional public sphere', a kind of parallel-world forum for real expression: the vital *samizdat* or underground literature, the strange and dissonant music, the oblique, often cryptic films. These observers postulated East European culture as counterculture, a coded critique of 'actually existing' socialism. The question they must now ask themselves is: what will happen when the artists brandish their axes to find that there is no longer a stone on which to grind them.

## ● PRAGUE

Only five years ago, Prague was the most rundown of Europe's great capitals. Rusted scaffolding obscured the view of the grand old buildings. By night the city centre was without street lights. Now the downtown has much the same feel as Cologne or West Berlin—just as the parliament has become as lively a forum for debate as the

Bundestag. Out of the cinematic mainstream since 1968, Czechoslovakia is now perhaps the handiest point of departure for a tour of Eastern Europe's new-found freedom in the cinema.

In a region noted for sectarian strife and absolutist monarchs, Czechoslovakia has enjoyed a tradition of political and religious tolerance since the fifteenth century. It is undoubtedly for this reason that the country has always been at the cultural avant-garde in literature, music and, most recently, the cinema. In modern times, Czechoslovakia was the only country in Eastern or Central Europe to have a fully functioning parliamentary democracy—which actually voted a communist party into power after the Second World War.

Thus, it was no surprise when the Czech government became the first in Eastern Europe to lift the ban on a number of pictures produced from 1967-70, just before this year's Berlin Festival. The Czech competition entry at Berlin, Jiri Menzel's *Larks on a String*, had been gathering dust since 1969. Two full-length Czech documentaries were also screened: *Elective Affinities* (shot during the Prague Spring) and *Tender Revolution*, an account of last year's student demonstrations which culminated in the resignation of the communist government. In all, 10 banned Czech and Slovak films were shown. And there are more to come. A new commission is considering releasing another 22 banned features and 120 shorts.

The release of those films is as much a question of economic good sense as political and cultural freedom. *Larks on a String* has been at the top of the Czech box-office since it opened earlier this year. The film has also been a big international seller for the state-run Czechoslovak Film Export service. The lifting of the ban on these films is a key development in the comprehensive overhaul of the Czech film business.

Czechoslovak Film—the banner of the official industry—is under new management. The government has already voted in favour of a bill which promotes the construction of more theatres across the country and gives the studios more rights and responsibilities. The bill falls just short of making the studios fully self-financing through box-office revenues and sales: the new management felt that such a measure risked 'commercialising' the Czechoslovak cinema, since only a handful of films make back their costs. At the same time, the Czechs are keener than ever to have more Western films in their theatres, on television and video: last year they spent \$1m importing 178 Western features. But Czechoslovak Film's import/export service can also boast a favourable trade balance: Czech exports brought home some \$1.3m. Business is good in the Czechoslovakian cinema.

In the midst of this restructuring, Kachyna's *The Last Butterfly* stands out as the beginning of a new and curious orientation within what is arguably Eastern Europe's most accomplished

film culture. Of course, this isn't the first time that the country has joined forces with the West for the purposes of a feature film. However, for pictures like *Amadeus*, *Yentl* or *The Howling II* (all shot in Czechoslovakia), the Czechs did little more than provide locations and extras. Revenues from services to foreign productions have been an important source of hard currency. But *The Last Butterfly* is different.

'For Kachyna's film the Czechs have contributed not only production and post-production services, but most of the creative elements and cash as well,' comments the film's producer, Steve North. 'Relatively speaking, their investment is enormous—the equivalent of \$1.9m. It's the first real co-production with the West since Carlo Ponti produced Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* and *The Firemen's Ball* in the early 60s.'

Based on real events, *The Last Butterfly* tells the story of a French mime who is blackmailed into performing at the Terezin concentration camp in order to mislead a visiting team of Red Cross fact-finders. During almost a decade of development, the project went through turnaround a number of times—with Marcel Marceau, Dick van Dyke and Ben Kingsley variously set for the lead. Finally, it's Tom Courtenay who plays the mime, backed by French actress Brigitte Fossey and Britain's Freddie Jones. If this all sounds a bit far removed from Kachyna's work from the period of the New Wave, it is.

For starters, this project is utterly new in that East and West are on an equal footing in a bid to cover costs, minimise risk and claim a larger market through multi-lateral co-operation. The film's French partner, Cinéma et Communications, invested FFR 7m, of which FFR 6m were from private French television network TF1. Britain's HTV kicked in \$.5m. And Cen-

tral Television will receive a share of revenues on foreign sales in exchange for its \$500,000 stake. However, North rightly stresses that it's the Czech partners, Studio Barrandov and Czechoslovak Film, whose contribution is greatest in terms of both investment and commitment.

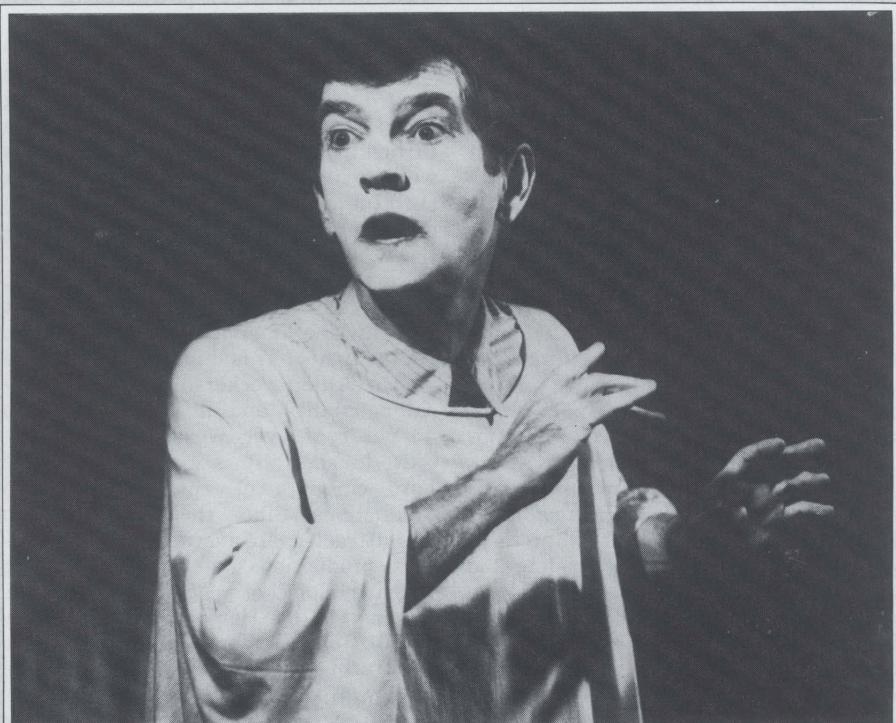
The project is an even greater curiosity for the reason that the director speaks no language other than Czech. Kachyna worked with the actors through a translator. For their part, they spoke in their native languages as the film has two 'original versions'—English and French. Indeed, one could say that with *The Last Butterfly* the popular West European recipe for 'Euro-pudding' (the deal-driven 'international' feature, which can be moulded to fit any number of programming slots) has been smuggled across the former Iron Curtain.

The economics—and cultural politics—of the project perhaps reveal how the East European cinema will ultimately be integrated into the West. So, too, its reception: like many other features financed with television money, *The Last Butterfly* has yet to find theatrical distributors in the West. On this side of the Czechoslovakian border, it seems that Kachyna's revival piece may be seen only by French and British tele-viewers. Sadly, the reincarnation of the Czech New Wave seems suited only for the airwaves.

## BUDAPEST

Few taxidrivers in Budapest speak English. Yet nearly every one of them spends his working day listening to Radio Bridge, a new English-language station created by the Hungarian state and the Voice of America—a branch of the US Information Service, formerly associated with the CIA. Democracy has

Tom Courtenay in Kachyna's *The Last Butterfly*.



made strange bedfellows in Hungary.

The country's chief aspiration, it is said, is to become closer to the West. That means English-language radio. It means a larger selection of consumer goods. It means earlier release dates for popular Western films. But perhaps most significantly, it means the economic and political conservatism of the newly elected coalition government, clearly cast in the image of the Christian Democrat governments of Western Europe. Their programme is the relaxation of socialist controls together with the gradual privatisation of publicly owned enterprises—all with a populist, nationalist touch.

Hungary has been perceived to be the most progressive of the East European nations in the postwar period. The country was the first to introduce limited market principles in a socialist state. Thanks to this so-called 'goulash communism', Hungary prospered in the 1970s, but then foundered in inefficiency, inflation and debt in the 80s. In 1990, Hungary entered its third straight year of recession: inflation stands at 23 per cent, 3 million of the 10.5 million population live below the poverty level, unemployment could soon rise to 400,000 and the country boasts the highest per capita foreign debt in Eastern Europe. Economic restructuring and austerity policies are the order of the day. But the most important—and controversial—economic mandate is privatisation of state-run enterprises and the introduction of foreign investment.

The state of the cinema mirrors that of the economy. Last year the 32 domestic films that played in Hungary drew only 6.2 million paying customers—2 million fewer than the previous year. Perhaps that's because movie-going is a luxury in these days of economic austerity. Perhaps it's because—as foreign observers contend—last year's crop of films was the worst in years.

'It's curious,' said one visiting Western critic at the Hungarian film week in Budapest, 'but since the decline of communism Hungarian film-makers seem to be floundering artistically. They've gone from dramatising their current situation to documenting past problems.'

In a sense, Hungarian film culture has always lived in the past. In the work of an older, perhaps greater generation of exiles like Alexander Korda or Michael Curtiz, Hungary existed only as a sentiment, an occasional glimpse of a genteel, bygone old world. (That exile's nostalgia for an imaginary Hapsburg Middle Europe lives on today, for example, in the Hollywood camerawork of Laszlo Kovacs—who, most notably, turned much of *The Deer Hunter* into a Hungarian film.) Miklos Jancso is perhaps the most vivid and celebrated example of those directors who remained, who lived and worked in a hard-bitten Hungarian present. But his films are often too personal to be accessible to non-Hungarian audiences: with their heavy-handed symbolism,



Szabo's *Colonel Redl*: the New Hungarian Internationalism.

circuitous narratives, bizarre camera angles and spooky music, they sometimes seem like parodies of East European films.

The exiled 'internationalism' to which Korda and Curtiz contributed in the 30s and 40s has found a contemporary counterpart, only this time in Hungary itself. The grand, even grandiose, work of Istvan Szabo corresponds almost too precisely to what the West wishes to see in East European cinema—even if the films are made with Western money and in German. His *Mephisto* and *Colonel Redl* represent the New Hungarian Internationalism; Szabo's next film is an English-language mega-production called *Opera*, to be shot in Budapest and produced by David Puttnam. The Hungarian cinema is currently at a crossroads: one way follows Jancso, the other Szabo. In the age of Eastern Europe's new economic realism, there is little question which path will be pursued.

'Our state-run studio Mafilm has always produced films at a loss,' says Szolt Kezdi Kovacs, Mafilm's outgoing director and a leading film-maker. 'We turned an annual profit on the services we provided to Western productions shooting here, but it was invariably eaten up by the Hungarian productions.'

In this new age of 'bottom line', Mafilm is committed to the idea that success should supersede nationalism. And why not? This huge, superb facility boasts skilled workers, high technological capability and a saving of 20 to 40 per cent over West European studios. In short, it is a magnet for the hard currency of 'runaway' Western productions. Since the 1970s, Mafilm has attracted an average of two Western productions a year, including Richard Fleischer's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1976), Herbert Ross' *Nijinsky* (1976), John Huston's *Escape to Victory* (1980). In recent years, as many as six foreign productions have come to Budapest each year, including Walter Hill's

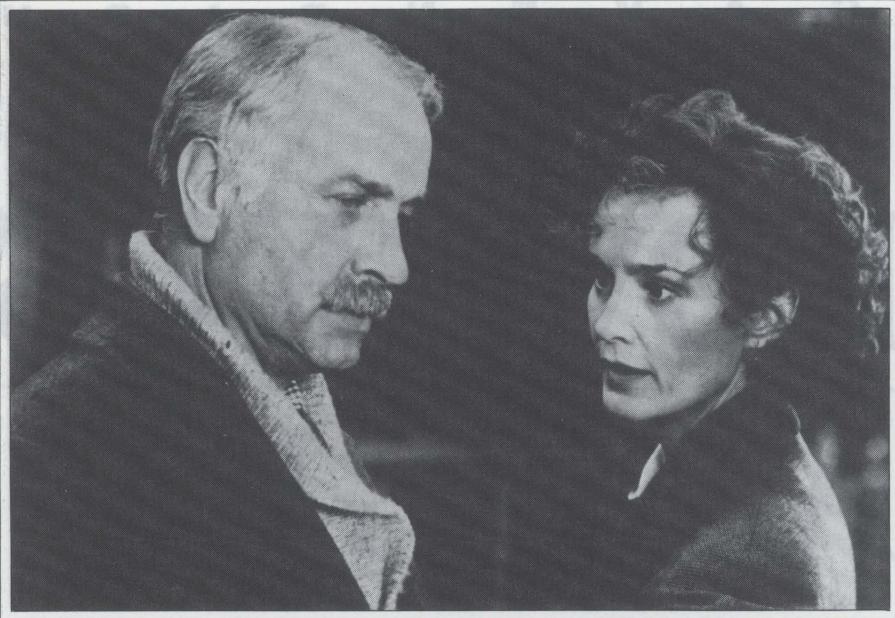
*Red Heat* (1988), Costa-Gavras' *Music Box* and the Gérard Depardieu vehicle *Cyrano de Bergerac* (both 1989). As a result of these and other Western productions, Mafilm earned \$5m in 1988 and \$8m in 1989.

Figures like that in the Hungarian cinema are as new as private enterprise. There have been a number of structural changes in the film industry: the dismantling of the central censorship board, the introduction of new accounting methods, proposed changes in status for 1,300 of Mafilm's 1,500 full-time employees. But the greatest change has been in a mentality that has developed contact with Western productions—and their budgets.

'The most important thing we learned from these productions,' says a production manager in Mafilm's international division, 'is that every mistake you make means money. Of course, it's the same with Hungarian features, but there, who's counting?'

Money has also been the theme of new distribution ventures. The old film releasing duopoly shared by state-run companies Mokep and Hungarofilm is a thing of the past. Four fledgling independent distributors sprang up last year. Since they entered the market, the number of American pictures distributed in Hungary has leapt from 30 a year (shown two years after their US release) to nearly 80 (shown at the same time as in Western Europe). Theatre admissions have shot up by the same percentage. Now even the state-run companies are entering the fray of competition, acquiring films which have hitherto been unimaginable—among them *Blue Velvet* and *Predator*—to win back some of their lost market share.

Of course, this transformation of the economic infrastructure of the industry is completely changing the face of the country's cinema. The production deals being put together in Hungary resemble those in the West more closely than ever, with independent producers becoming truly independent, seeking



Made in Hungary: Costa-Gavras' *Music Box*. Armin Mueller-Stahl, Jessica Lange.

finance from a wide range of sources, many of them Western. Hungarian producers with partners in two West European countries now qualify for EC funding. But a commercial industrial apparatus can't work without a motor: commercial projects. The most immediate result of these changes has been the appearance of more comedies and crowd-pleasers among Hungarian films. Likewise, there has been a surge in documentaries, thanks to the demand for low-budget items generated by new commercial Hungarian TV. That trend is enforced by the changing political climate that now allows previously off-limit subjects and events to be examined.

But Hungarian industry decision-makers and creators are of two minds about the changes taking place. 'In a sense, we are unprepared for what's happening,' says Kezdi Kovacs. 'I fear that the new generation of film-makers believes private producers will simply take over the role the state used to play. Our young directors expect them to be as generous and gullible as their public sector counterparts were. What they don't understand is that a system can offer either economic incentives or social benefits, but not both.'

For the creative development of the Hungarian cinema, Kezdi Kovacs advocates a greater division of labour in the industry: a more rigorous system of checks and balances between the producer and the director, and a greater emphasis on the autonomy of the screenwriter. In a word, he advocates the model of the American industry. He likewise believes that the influx of American films through new distribution ventures will inevitably make an important and beneficial impression on the new generation of Hungarian directors. Yet Kezdi Kovacs and others dearly hope that the new government doesn't take away the subsidies that have permitted the Hungarian cinema to make some 40 films a year.

'Don't forget that Hungarian films

have played an important role in fostering liberalism in our country and in spreading a liberal image of Hungary around the world. For that reason I think the government must continue to support the national cinema the way it has in the past—the way, say, France supports its national cinema.'

Like the programme of the country's newly elected government, Szolt Kezdi Kovacs' plan for the industry is one that would bring Hungary closer to the West. For this reason, he could well be said to be leading the Hungarian cinema down the path taken by Istvan Szabo. The irony is that Kezdi Kovacs learned film-making as Miklos Jancso's assistant during the director's most radical period.

### LOOKING WEST

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the East German election and the forthcoming reunification of the two Germanies are perhaps more dramatic than events in Czechoslovakia or Hungary. But the reshuffling of the industry there will be decidedly less dramatic—principally because there's much less to reshuffle. DEFA, the banner of the official industry, will become leaner and meaner, and possibly operate more closely with West German cinema institutions. Just as Berlin may once again become the capital of a united Germany, it could also conceivably become *Grossdeutschland's* cinema centre, using East Berlin's Babelsberg studios. However, given the current depressed state of the West German film industry, the principal benefits of unification won't be cinematic.

In Poland, legislative reform three years ago sent Film Polski, the official motion picture import-export agent, into a flurry. But even with its new legal mandate, the state distributor's greatest achievements have so far been the creation of a video branch and the East European première of a James Bond film. Sadly, the Polish cinema remains blighted by the economic condi-

tions under which the country continues to labour: less than a year after the start of the Solidarity-led government's package of strict austerity and radical market reform, the economy is in ruins. As a result, this East European country which enjoyed perhaps the greatest artistic freedom during the socialist years is witnessing a kind of brain drain. Its most illustrious names—Wajda, Zanussi, Kieslowski—have been obliged to work abroad or with foreign producers. Like most East Europeans, only more so, the Poles have more pressing matters to think about than film-making.

Ditto for the former Soviet satellites of the Balkans. Marked by depressed agrarian economies and devoid of the rich cultural traditions of their northern neighbours, Bulgaria and Romania will probably have to wait another decade before their national cinemas come into their own in the post-socialist period.

Among the former Iron Curtain' countries, Czechoslovakia and Hungary stand at the cinematic forefront. The closest to the West geographically, they have also moved most quickly toward Western movie producers and distributors. At present, only these two countries have the relative political and economic stability, as well as the raw materials (talent and an industry infrastructure), to make an attractive partner for the Western film industry. Ironically, these are also the only countries whose national cinemas are autonomous and developed enough to feel the pinch of Eastern Europe's new cultural internationalism.

The sometimes strident nationalist voices now heard in these countries would like to claim that Kachyna's or Szabo's recent work stands in a direct line of descent from pre-socialist Czech and Hungarian culture. *The Last Butterfly* or *Opera*, they argue, shares the outward-looking spirit that reigned in Hungary and Czechoslovakia just before the Soviet invasions of 1956 and 1968. The decades of turbid, introspective cinema that followed, they suggest, was an aberration, an example of national culture in internal exile. The view of foreign observers differs. Western connoisseurs of *samizdat* expression are already lamenting the loss of that oddly indeterminate thing called East European culture: a world of decaying baroque monuments and inert public institutions where Lenin and long queues existed side by side with gypsy fortune-tellers and Danube commerce.

Both views are short-sighted. The countries of Eastern Europe are starting from scratch. The social circumstances and artistic mandates of the socialist period are not those of today: neither are those of Imre Nagy's Hungary or the Prague Spring. The decline of socialism in the East is giving rise to a culture and society utterly without precedent. The only certainty is that, whatever their appearance, it will be reflected by the new East European cinema.

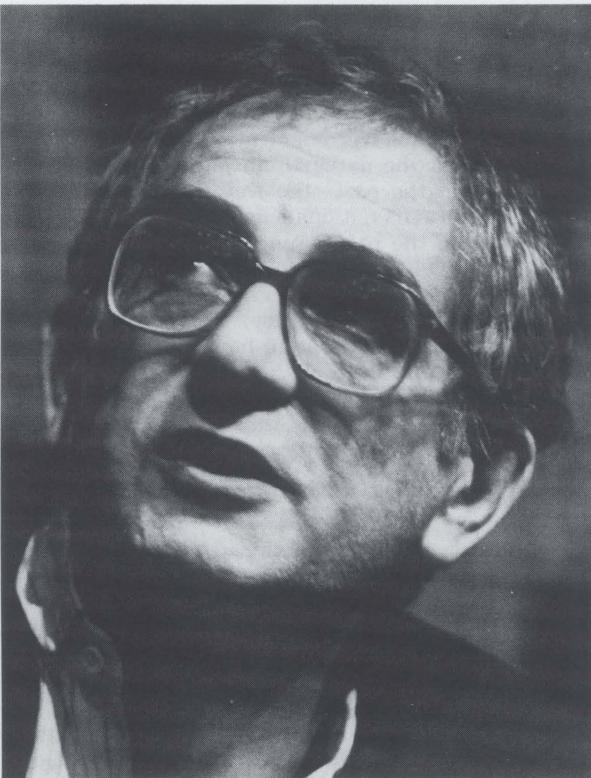
# KIESLOWSKI'S DECATALOGUE

With his latest films based on the Decalogue, the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski seems to have pulled off two difficult feats in one stroke. Not only has the ten-part series established him as a world-class talent, but it has also aroused a new interest in the Ten Commandments.

Certainly, the critics who first saw the cycle at the Venice festival last year were as eager to praise as they were frantic to discover the relevant commandments (an Italian communist was caught by Kieslowski himself reduced to ringing the Vatican at three o'clock in the morning from a public phone booth). Since then, success has followed success: *A Short Film About Killing* (Decalogue Five) voted Best European Film of 1988; Part Six, *A Short Film About Love*, described as 'perfection' by one reviewer, and the whole cycle given wide publicity and a primetime BBC2 Sunday slot after its launch on 6 May in Britain.

With twenty years in film behind him, Kieslowski is mildly bemused by this response. In a wry moment, loyally chain-smoking Polish cigarettes, he will put it down to snobbery, the 'fad for things from the East' which has swept through Western Europe in recent months. But this is the deliberate modesty of someone who still considers himself a 'provincial' film-maker and for whom, at the age of 49, fame has come relatively late in life. It is also a little unfair to accuse critics of modish pretence, since many know his previous work and have acclaimed it accordingly. They have simply recognised the fact that the *Decalogue* is a series of stunning, compelling and extremely well-made films from a director at the height of his creative powers.

Undoubtedly it is surprising that anyone should have taken on the Ten Com-



mandments at all, bearing in mind their awesome dimensions, least of all Kieslowski himself, a self-confessed agnostic. Ethical dilemmas have always intrigued him, it is true, but his reputation had been based solidly on films of a strong political bent. What could be more different than the *Decalogue*, these tightly honed homages to ordinary people struggling with everyday moral choices, with their exclusive focus on the personal? How could it be that a supremely Polish director has made ten films in the mid-1980s which deliberately ignore the realities of the time and concentrate their energy on a wide range of dramas, but all lying well outside the political domain?

His evolution has been gradual, partially reflecting the needs of the public, but also developing an internal creative

momentum of its own. He started life in documentaries, believing with many of his contemporaries who graduated from the Lodz Film School in the late 1960s, that the genre could 'describe the world'. Films like *Lodz—The Town* (1969), *The Factory* (1970), *Standards of Safety and Hygiene in a Copper Mine* (1972) and *Workers '71* (1972) are fascinated with the details of life concealed behind a wall of official propaganda.

He later became dissatisfied with the limitations of documentary, finding that 'the closer the camera gets to its human object, the more that human object seems to disappear before the camera.' He transferred his interests into the realm of features. Films such as *Camera Buff* (1979), the comic story of a worker turned amateur videocameraman who starts to see the problems of film-making when he clashes with the official version of reality, placed him squarely in the 'Moral Anxiety' school of directors of the time.

These were films very much concerned with the moral compromises demanded by the System, as well as the discrepancy between the official version and reality itself. By the early 80s, however, Kieslowski's interests can be seen moving away from films whose characters tend to represent defined social groups and whose scope seems narrowly political. *Blind Chance*, for instance, made mostly in 1981 but set in the immediate pre-Solidarity months, still confronts the world of politics, but with an additional twist—Fate. A young medical student decides to take time off from his studies to think about his life after the death of his father. He sprints to catch a train as it leaves a station and, at this point, the narrative splits three ways, each taking him into a different social milieu. One road takes him into the Party, another into the

opposition, the third leaves him politically neutral, seeking a 'quiet life'. The film is a tribute to the importance Kieslowski attaches to the element of hazard in people's lives, and would no doubt have raised a few eyebrows in Poland had it not been banned for several years.

With his next film, he evolves further. *No End* (1984) is set at the height of martial law, yet while the tone is typical of the gloom, despondency and sense of terrible defeat prevalent at the time, Kieslowski ignored the superficial symbols of 1982: tanks, riot police, etc. It is a quiet film and for the first time a strong personal narrative and metaphysical element creep into his work.

A human-rights lawyer, who appears in the first scene to explain perfunctorily that he died three days ago, had been due to defend a Solidarity activist arrested for organising a strike after martial law. The case is taken over after his death by an older lawyer who is keen to plea-bargain a morally dubious deal with the authorities. The activist, under pressure from his family and buckling under the weight of the lawyer's matter-of-fact philosophy, succumbs. However, placed alongside this moral tragedy is the terrible despair of the dead lawyer's wife, who eventually decides to commit suicide. For her, the drama being played out in the political arena is overshadowed totally by the loss of her husband.

*No End* was seen as a deeply religious film, and rightly so: much of the style and 'feel' of it is but a short step away from the *Decalogue*. Significantly, it was the first film co-scripted with Krzysztof Piesiewicz, a lawyer by training and one of the prosecutors in the Popieluszko trial of 1984. The two men met in 1982 while Kieslowski was trying with official permission to make a documentary about political trials. Piesiewicz was the first to notice that the cameras were unnerving the judges, causing them to suspend sentence, and started booking the documentary-maker for his clients. It was Piesiewicz, described affectionately by Kieslowski as 'a man of extraordinary sensitivity who has a lot of time on his hands and therefore probably does too much thinking', who later suggested taking on the Ten Commandments.

'*No End* had a terrible reception in Poland,' Kieslowski remembers. 'The authorities hated it, the opposition criticised the pessimism in the film, and the church objected to the suicide and the fact that the leading actress was filmed several times without a bra and once without her underwear. I bumped into Piesiewicz on the street by chance. We were both depressed. It was raining. I had lost a glove. Then he suddenly turned to me and said: "Someone should make a film about the Decalogue. You should do it."

'People ask me all the time why we decided to go ahead with it—obviously it was a terrible idea! But the truth is I simply don't know and neither does he. Maybe there was something tangible in



*Decalogue One: Henryk Baronowski, Wojciech Klata.*

the air. We were living in difficult times and everything in Poland was in a colossal mess. No one really knew what was right and wrong any more or why we even carried on living. We thought maybe it was worthwhile going back to the simplest, most basic, most elementary principles of how to lead one's life.'

The script, which he co-wrote with Piesiewicz in the cramped kitchen of his Warsaw apartment, took twelve months to complete. From the very beginning, they were appalled by the enormity of what they had taken on. There were no models they could turn to and the project was bound to arouse animosity in a Catholic country like Poland, where the Commandments were held with deep orthodox reverence.

They spent much time reading up as much as possible about the Old and New Testaments, as well as several commentaries on the Commandments themselves, before deciding to dispense

with the information altogether. They were not setting out to be priests and wanted to avoid didacticism. In any case, for Kieslowski, who once said he would rather read a book than go to the cinema, other authors were perhaps more significant. Dostoevski, Mann, Kafka and Camus are the four names he is reluctantly prepared to list when asked the awful question as to his influences.

Gradually, a concept began to emerge: ten films which they would offer to Polish television as a series. They ignored political parables, since Kieslowski was 'bored' with politics by then and recognised that the public was disillusioned and had collapsed into a general state of apathy. Developing his earlier interest in hazard, he decided that the camera should seem to pick its subjects at random. The original concept was to show a stadium in which the

*Decalogue Six (A Short Film About Love): Grazyna Szapłowska.*



camera would alight on one face out of thousands, but he and Piesiewicz eventually opted for a Warsaw housing estate, the epitome of everything urban and contemporary. The characters would be ordinary people, some of whom would appear fleetingly even in the films in which they were not the leading protagonists, in order to create a kind of unity and pathos.

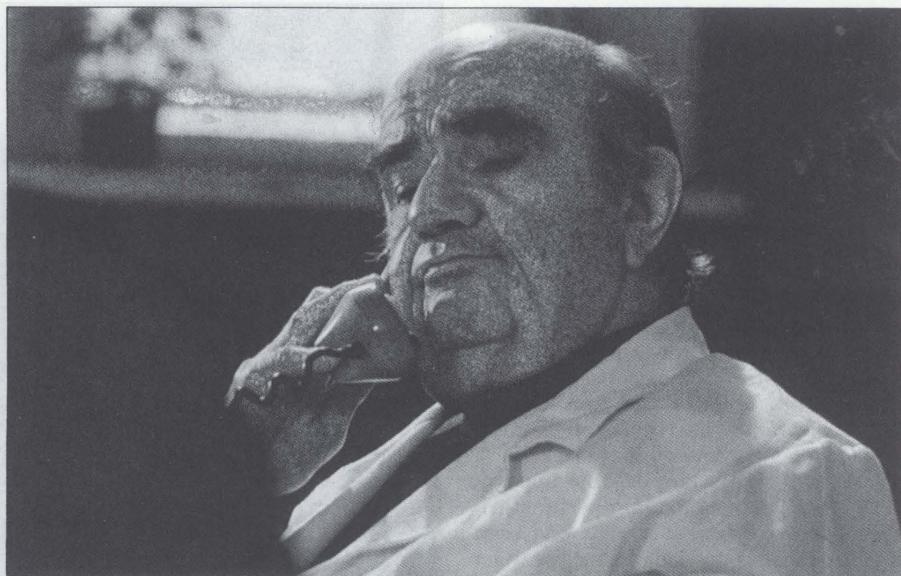
The films are also held together as a unity by a mysterious young man who appears at crucial moments. He has been dubbed the 'silent witness' and appears symbolically in the first frames of Decalogue One, warming his hands by a fire near the small lake where the young son of the scientist drowns, and actually looking straight into the camera for a few seconds. His expression is uncanny, a combination of disapproval and disappointment. He was only written into the original screenplay at a late stage and his presence in all but two of the cycle has prompted speculation as to who he is supposed to represent: an Angel of Fate, God, Kieslowski himself?

'No, it is not me—I don't really know who he is. For a long time, I felt there was something missing in the scripts. Then one day I happened to be watching the film of a colleague along with an old Polish writer. We all thought the film was pretty mediocre, but the writer said he liked it and particularly liked the scene in a cemetery where a man dressed in black appeared. No one else had seen that man. The director told him he didn't exist. "But I saw him," said the writer. One week later, he had died. I suddenly understood what was missing in the films—an element of mystery, something elusive and inexplicable.'

There are many such moments: omens, mirrored situations, repeated gestures, the twists and turns of the plots which constantly shift expectations and sympathies, demanding recognition of the tricks fate plays in life. The characters are placed deliberately in extreme situations, but Kieslowski avoids both moralising about their dilemmas and banality. While a dispassionate observer (he has been accused in the past of a certain coldness and himself once admitted that 'all my films are made as if under glass'), in *Decalogue* he reserves sympathy for everyone. He agrees that his position is essentially that of the humanist.

I know it is very unfashionable these days, but I do believe in Humanity. I believe in Right and Wrong, although it is difficult to talk about black or white in the times in which we live. But I think one is definitely better than the other and I do believe that people want to choose Right—it is just that sometimes they are unable to do so.'

This conflict, or tension, is at the heart of his modern-day stories. Although the Commandments are only the springboard from which he focuses themes of love, death, redemption and solitude, they are nevertheless relevant. It is important to know which film is based on which commandment, and



*Decalogue Two: Aleksander Bardini.*

generally they follow the sequence as given in Chapter 20 of Exodus. Some, however, may be more confusing than others.

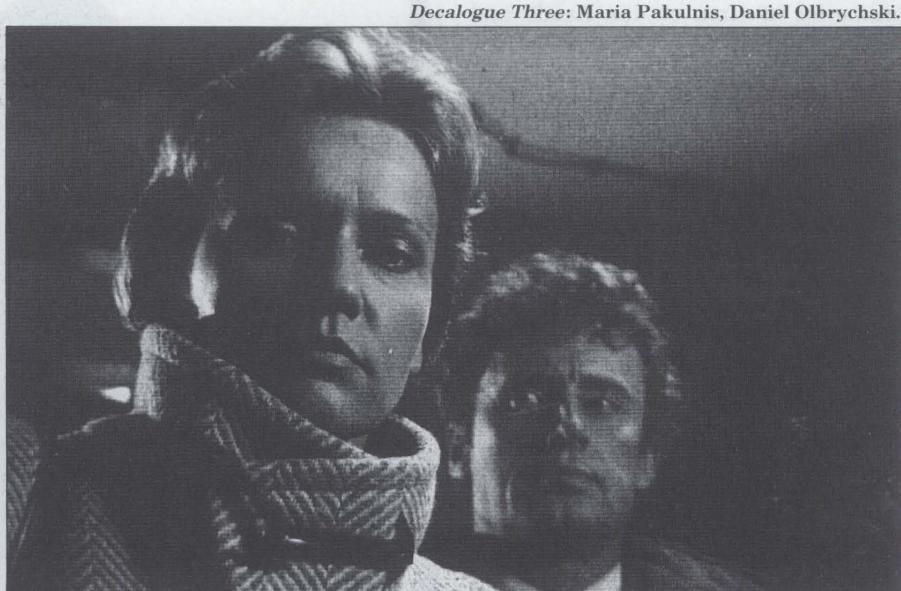
Decalogue Two, for example, is from the Commandment 'thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.' Although it does touch on the issue of abortion, the film is largely about the surgeon in the hospital who is reluctant to 'play God' and not only predict the death of his patient but also decide the fate of an unborn child. There has also been much head-scratching over Decalogue Six, the series version of *A Short Film About Love*, but it is, according to the director, loosely based on 'thou shalt not commit adultery'. Thus Decalogue Nine, which seems a more obvious candidate for the adultery theme, becomes 'thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.'

There is a fair quota of deaths and a tangible sense of hopelessness in the films, which many have remarked upon. But despite labelling himself a 'professional pessimist', Kieslowski refuses to accept that the films are in any way bleak. 'The films don't exactly have a "happy ending", but they do end well,'

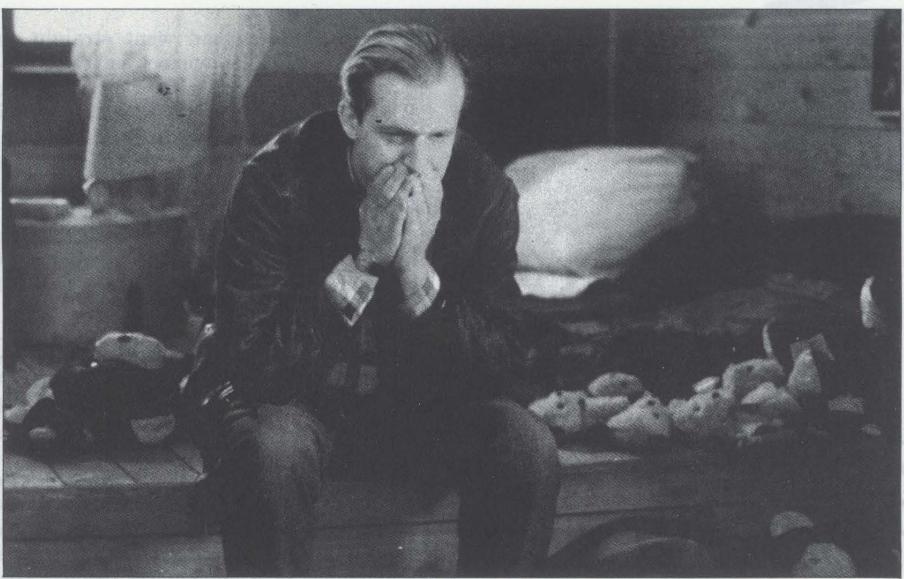
he says. Even *A Short Film About Killing*? 'Yes, even that one. I think that the lawyer who is shown weeping at the end of the film has learnt something. He has understood that it is necessary to find some kind of "way".'

What this 'way' might be is never made explicit. True to his agnosticism, Kieslowski is reluctant to speculate about the existence of a higher deity, but will admit that several characters speak lines with which he would be happy to concur. One example is the scene in the first film between the young boy and his Catholic aunt (a scene, incidentally, not in the original screenplay), when he asks her who God is. She embraces him and asks him what he feels. 'Love,' he says. 'Exactly,' she replies. 'That is where He is.' Another is when the professor of ethics in Decalogue Eight is asked who it is who judges human actions. She answers: 'He, who is. He, who is in all of us. I don't go to church and never use the word "God". But you can live with Belief without using the word.'

Remarkably, the actual filming took less than twelve months, but the cycle



*Decalogue Three: Maria Pakulnis, Daniel Olbrychski.*



Decalogue Seven: Boguslaw Linda.

was not shot in numerical sequence. *A Short Film About Killing* came first because a deal had been struck for two of the series to be turned into feature-length versions and this was the one Kieslowski said he most wanted to direct. After that, the series was shot according to the availability of cameramen and locations. On some occasions, this could involve takes for three films on the same day if the same location on the housing estate was used in more than one film. Only one serious interruption occurred: everyone on set, including the stuntmen, was so disturbed by the execution scene in Decalogue Five that Kieslowski decided to stop filming and resumed only the next day. 'It was only eleven o'clock in the morning, but everyone had gone weak at the knees, including myself. Although we all knew it was not for real, the sight was simply unbearable.'

Taking into consideration the fact that ten different cameramen were used, the films are also remarkable for their stylistic unity. Apparently, this was accidental. Always ready to dispel any notion of the omnipotent director, Kieslowski insists that he gave his

photographers absolute freedom to do as they liked. It was cameraman Slawomir Idziak's idea, for example, to use the filters in *A Short Film About Killing*—in all, an astonishing 600 were required. Many have commented on the consistent play of light and dark in the series, but on this point the director is prepared only to have a little joke at his cameramen's expense: 'I really did tell them they could do what they liked. If they wanted to use one kind of lighting, I said okay. If they wanted to use the rails, I said fine. In fact, the whole thing became a sort of competition. And what happens? All the films look the same.'

If he gave the cast and cameramen a certain amount of freedom, arguing that style and tone were obvious from the screenplays, the same cannot be said of the editing. There has been some pretty brutal pruning between the conception and final product, much of which created the economy and precision for which the films have been so highly praised. Several scripted sequences were drastically rearranged or simply cut. Decalogue One, for example, contains a long scene in which Krzysztof, the scientist, asks his computer why his

son had to die: the final version shows the screen with only the words 'I am ready'—a terrible irony bearing in mind Krzysztof's unpreparedness for death. Kieslowski himself is critical of young directors who are so attached to their work that they cannot bear to cut anything at all. He, in stark contrast, even purged the silent witness from Decalogue Seven because the pictures shot were 'no good'.

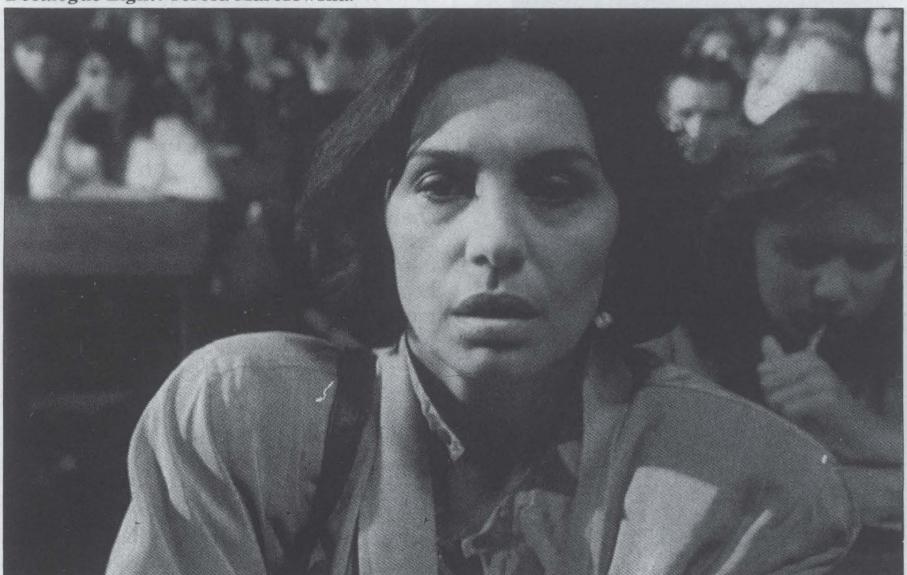
One paradox is that the *Decalogue* is quite likely to strike more of a chord with Western viewers than in Poland. The ratings there were not bad—twelve million watched the first, which rose to fifteen million for the last—although, ironically, an opinion poll commissioned not long after revealed that seventy per cent of Poles did not know what the *Decalogue* was, and twenty per cent thought it was something to do with the Olympics. Part of the reason for this general indifference, one suspects, is psychological. By the time the series was shown on Polish television early this year, the population had other things to concentrate its mind on, most of them economic or political. Many no doubt considered the Ten Commandments a luxury they could perhaps ill afford.

The other commodity the country cannot afford, alas, is films: the cinema industry is virtually bankrupt and the government is withdrawing its subsidies to the various studios. Kieslowski is reluctant to trail around with a begging bowl while there are two hundred directors desperate for money and work. Fortunately, he is one of the lucky few who can trade their talent and reputation in exchange for foreign funding. His next project is being financed by a French production company and is a love story, in which he hopes to cast American actress Andie McDowell in a leading role. Co-written with Piesiewicz, it allegedly has a 'good ending', even a 'happy ending'. This, in Kieslowski-speak, means one of the heroines dies and the other lives on.

It would seem as if he has come to the end of the road as far as Poland is concerned. Although still living in Warsaw and working to help reorganise the cinema industry, he openly admits to not understanding what the public want from him there. The *Decalogue* could therefore well be the last film he will make in Poland altogether.

He is not being forced to work abroad: it is his personal choice and reflects his creative interests. He is now more interested in the West, where he says people may be more lonely than in the East, but has developed nevertheless a convenient argument to justify this decision: 'It is not important where you put your camera, but why you put it where you do. It is a particularly elegant theory because I know I am probably never going to work in Poland again.'

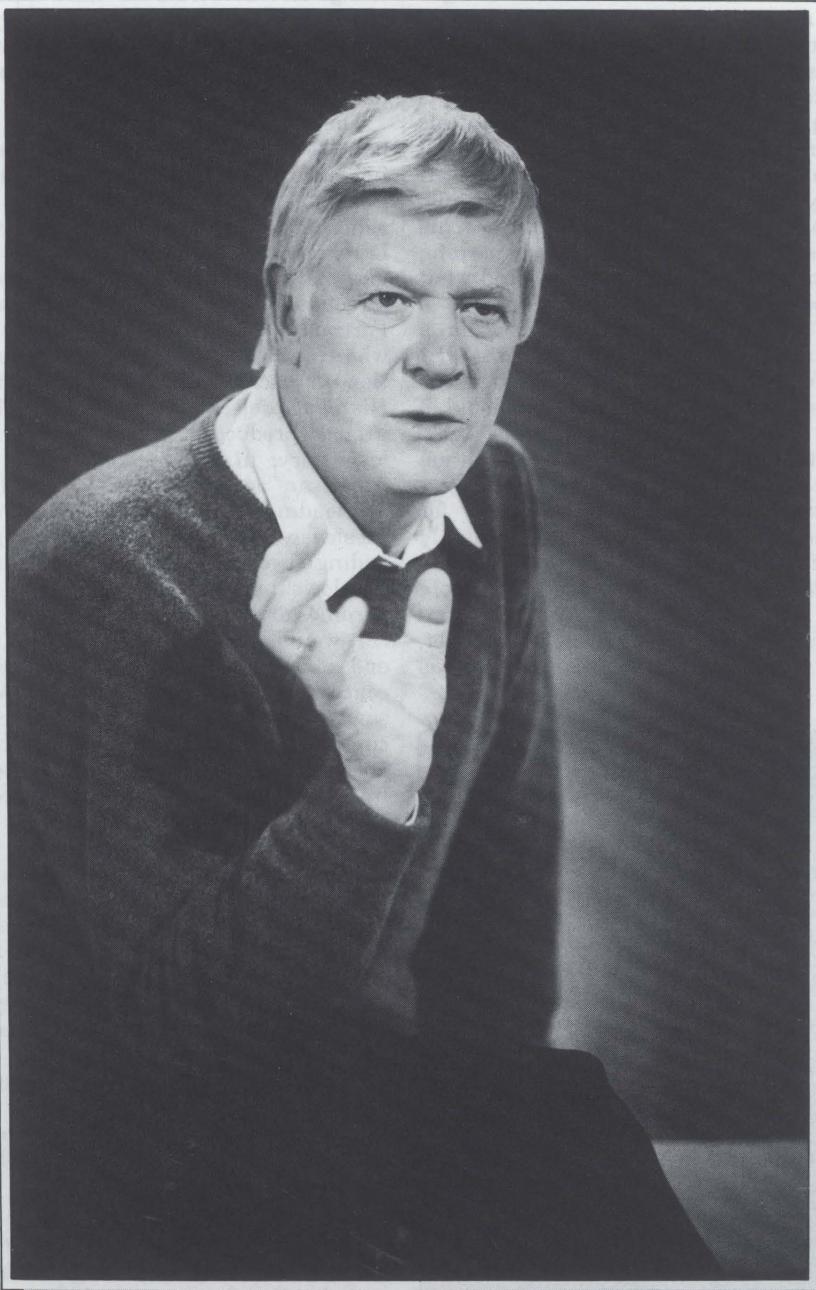
Decalogue Eight: Teresa Marczevska.



The English language version of the 'Decalogue' screenplay is being published by Faber & Faber in spring 1991.

FRAMED

# Leslie Woodhead



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH QUILL

Leslie Woodhead went straight to Granada Television as a production trainee in 1961 after reading English at Cambridge; and stayed there until, in November last year, after 28 years on the staff, he went freelance. He is now back at Granada as executive producer for a series of drama documentaries being developed jointly with Home Box Office in New York. It seemed like a good time to talk.

Talking with him is always a pleasure. He speaks in great rushes of enthusiasm and commitment, no sign of the 'typical' Oxbridge graduates who coolly and methodically climb the ropes of British television, but rather considerable evidence of a huge curiosity, a willingness to try anything across a wide range of programming and a strong moral conviction that television has a job to do in the development of a democratic society. His programmes have made us look at aspects of the world which we might otherwise never have got around to examining, or even noticing.

I first met him when I moved back to Britain from California for the start of the National Film School in 1970. It was crucial for me to meet the people making films and television programmes in Britain to find out what they wanted and what they advised. A visit was arranged to the BBC, where an excellent lunch was served in the company of the giants of the major strands in BBC television production. After a few moments, the conversation switched from what might have become a penetrating analysis of the problems facing public service broadcasting in the 1970s to an equally absorbing argument about the comparative merits of claret and burgundy.

The impression given, or at least gained, was that television in Britain was in good hands; the problems and prospects were clearly understood; we might as well talk about something else which interested us. I knew it would take longer than that first visit to be taken into that particular club, before I would meet people who would admit to having doubts and questions in their mind.

The reception at Granada was different. Here I was invited by the film-makers, who immediately wanted to know the news from California, from the frontline of production. I remember one obsessed and almost crazed voice—questions pouring out, opinions freely given. Leslie Woodhead. He was part of the generation brought into television by Denis Forman and nurtured by him and David Plowright. Often teamed with journalists, who added some rigour (Plowright is credited with knowing how to link people together, covering each other's weaknesses), the film-makers were given their heads to see how television could be made exciting for the viewer and for the practitioner.

Leslie Woodhead's first steps were as Mike Grigsby's researcher, working on programmes about two-headed sheep and 'dotty little films about the last toffee-maker in Oldham contrasted with hydroelectric schemes in the North... I became absolutely engrossed with the craft of film-making through working alongside Grigsby.' This first 'dunk' into film was with a clockwork Bolex, 24-second winds

and all that went with that. The exhilaration, but also the limitations of that type of filming were to play an important part in his work.

First came a spell in the standard Granada 'school' of studio directing (*What the Papers Say, All Our Yesterdays*), interrupted by a documentary on L. S. Lowry which he persuaded Denis Forman to give him a chance on. For this they unpacked Granada's first Eclair camera, issued with a note which read, 'subject to tripod being used and sound being audible'. The tripod wasn't used and the sound was rarely audible, but something was clobbered together to give Woodhead and later Granada something to go on.

Transferred after eighteen months at his request to *World in Action*, Woodhead's first film started out with an Auricon and a tripod 'and the huge laboriousness of all that'. 'Somewhere down the line we got our hands on an Eclair, and that transformation—the ability to pick up and run with it—was just so exhilarating. That new technology enabled us to make the films we wanted to make and changed the whole style and content of what we did.'

Woodhead recalls that in those 'heady mid-60s days' people were putting stickers on their guitars which boasted 'This machine kills fascists', and he's sure they put one on the Eclair. It was one of those rare moments in film history where the film-makers demanded the new tools because they knew how to use them.

A large part of television history could be told as a struggle between the journalists and the film-makers. After its primary role of entertainment, television's mission to inform has more often than not just inherited the ideas and attitudes of print journalism. Granada, certain elements in the much larger BBC and more recently Central have given film-makers the room they need to develop their craft. Woodhead seems to have profited from the battle for power of these two aspects of factual television.

When Jeremy Wallington joined the *World in Action* team from the *Sunday Times* (and 'Insight'), he brought with him a sense of journalism which was seen as 'a worthwhile moral activity'. Woodhead embraced that, being, as he says, forced to think harder and look straighter at what they were doing and what the images were doing. At the same time, he was able to express the hope that his 'obsession with film beefed up Wallington's dreary notebooks'.

In general, Woodhead speaks with affection of *World in Action*, which spawned a generation of television journalists and film-makers—Gus MacDonald, John Birt, Chris Menges, Mike Dodds. What he calls the 'Dylan Thomas days of discovering boyhood' were replaced in the late 70s and 80s by a harder-edged investigative journalism (David Boulton, Ray Fitzwalter). He considers that this development is right and proper; that it has become, in fact, a challenged and endangered species. 'Everything from "freedom of information" being impinged to the increased watchfulness of Corporate Britain and the increase of Government aggression, during the 80s, towards the territory that investigative journalists have taken for granted.'

'The drama-documentary,' he says, 'came about as a bleakly pragmatic solu-

tion to practical problems. At a time in the late 60s when we were able to cover the American conduct of affairs in SE Asia with great freedom and had access (usually courtesy of US helicopter) to say rude things about American policy, we weren't able to do any kind of adequate reporting on Eastern Europe, because they wouldn't let us in.'

'Sitting around worrying about that with some others, I came across some Swedish Amnesty material, a prison diary kept by General Grigorenko which had been smuggled out. I think it was Jeremy Wallington who suggested we try to find a way to do that, if necessary including minimal reconstruction, but holding as close as possible to the transcript. I was very suspicious of the idea. Finally it was John Birt (then running *World in Action*) who said, "Why don't you just try it?"'

This became *The Man Who Couldn't Keep Quiet* (1970), which was 'fastidious to a fault about not inventing dialogue, about researching settings and characters and look-alikes'. It was two years before Woodhead did another: *Chinese Struggle*, based on a transcript released by the Red Guard of a 'struggle' session against the widow of Mao's chief rival. Dramatisation was necessary again: 'It is the form which lets you through the door when all other forms have let you down.'

People only say things like that—even television people—when they believe, as Leslie Woodhead clearly does, that democratic society ought to be free to look at any subject, anywhere, and show the results within television's normal factual programme output. Deprived of access to do this, dramatisation is the only recourse, but in a form which still clings to as much of the apparatus of factual television as possible.

As part of his own education in this area, Woodhead agreed to direct some plays on film for Granada, including one by Arthur Hopcraft and another by Jim Allen. 'Both wrote within the realist tradition, so it didn't seem like much of a jump.' But Woodhead did not much like the experience. Taking on an existing script and 'just' directing it could never really satisfy him.

Although it was four years before Woodhead did another drama-doc (*Szczecin*, 1976), they were now established as a genre, a television strand. And although he resisted setting up a special unit for the purpose, for the good reason that they could end up making things to keep the unit busy rather than because they had an access problem, eventually he and David Boulton did set up an office and produced films like Gordon Fleming's *Mirage*, and two by John Irvin, *Collision Course* and *Power Struggle*.

Woodhead found Irvin's style quite seductive (as seen also in *Tinker, Tailor*), but he was much more influenced by Peter Watkins (*Culloden*, *The War Game*) and most of all by Ken Loach, beginning with *Cathy Come Home*. As an aside, Woodhead told how he and Loach had much later discussed the discomfort caused by naturalist drama in certain political and broadcasting circles, whenever the films strayed into political territory. It almost seemed as if naturalism was seen to be the property of the centre right, of the status quo. It was not fair to be visually convincing and critical.

Like many of his generation, Woodhead admits to a fetish about labelling things properly and taking the audience into his confidence, sharing with them the rules of his particular game. But now he feels ambivalent: on the one hand audiences are much more sophisticated, but on the other there is still a lot of deception and naivety. 'Reconstruction has almost blown journalism off the screen in America, with the labelling process very sloppy or absent altogether. At the other end, you can still see someone arriving at a tiny village on the Congo (in *Great Rivers*), turning to camera and saying, "Well, here I am on the Congo, all alone in the middle of the night . . .", and we are invited to believe he's magically found his way without four capering film crew around!'

The last of Leslie Woodhead's great obsessions is making ethnographic films for primetime audiences in the *Disappearing World* series launched by Brian Moser in 1970 at Granada, another example of Denis Forman sponsorship. Somewhere between *Chinese Struggle* and *Szczecin*, Woodhead found himself in East Africa on the first of three missions to film the Mursi with Manchester anthropologist David Turton. He has written about this in *A Box Full of Spirits* (Heinemann, 1987), where he describes the experience as the most absorbing business of his life.

When I asked what primarily attracted him to this work, it was against the background of an earlier comment about the challenge of reaching a 9 o'clock audience who might switch on expecting *Dallas* and 'instead get a documentary about symbiotic relationships between tribes in East Africa'. What absorbed him, he says, is 'the degree of articulation and clarity we are obliged to provide in these circumstances—and that's what I'm there for—since the whole purpose of *Disappearing World* is to bring some intriguing material to the attention of an audience which otherwise might not collide with it.' So, what intrigued him: the subject matter or the aesthetic puzzles involved in dealing with this sort of material?

It had been a long conversation, almost without pause for breath. But now Leslie hesitated. Maybe the question was daft. 'I think they're probably completely intertwined . . . absolutely one and the same thing. No two of the films present the same challenges. I remember with the second of the Mursi films, which was about symbiosis (between the two tribes), we cudgelled our brains trying to think how we could get on to film what was primarily a print thesis—how difficult it was to get a bunch of very elusive intellectual ideas down as narrative film.' The result was a fascinating mosaic of factual representation and interpretation, never for a moment condescending to the audience and keeping nothing back which might help an audience follow them through the complicated process that this kind of filming represents.

There's no easy way to sum up this refreshing, truthful and perpetually inquisitive man, but fortunately there's no need to. He's part way through a book (again for Heinemann) about his life in television. This conversation has only been a preview.

COLIN YOUNG

w h a t e v e r

# BETTE

LAWRENCE

Of all the art forms, movies are the most personal, spurring on feelings of ownership and possession which neither live theatre nor music quite seem to do. The emotional connections made by a moviegoer with a star can have an almost familial intensity, as any reader of Nathanael West knows. In the darkened theatre, before the videocassette made the experience of attending the movies more casual and less intimate, the star's light, or aura if you will, shone out like a beacon to the viewer; or maybe it's more accurate to say that it spread out like a net, and the viewer was trapped in paradise. People spoke of 'taking in' a movie, and this idea of ingestion, perhaps even penetration, spoke of a closeness that needs no further explication.

Stars exist because audiences identify with them and are able to project their own concerns on to the single, strong personality up there on the screen. Audiences identified with Garbo's loneliness, Gable's extroversion, Stanwyck's chipped-marble cool, Henry Fonda's slomo nice-guyism, Cooper's gaucheries or Bette Davis' turn-on-a-dime implacability. Perhaps the greatest and most common fantasy for all star-gazers was some day to come into closer contact with their idol, whether through a handwritten letter, a hastily scribbled autograph, or, as incredible as that might seem, an actual meeting in the flesh.

But distance makes the heart grow fonder: the star's very remoteness and inaccessibility is, I think, the core of his

or her appeal. This is a story about the intrusion of reality into a fantasy, about the destruction of a relationship by, paradoxically, closing the gap between the two people in that relationship. It began on Valentine's Day, 1989, when I interviewed my favourite movie star, Bette Davis.

Being a working journalist, I had interviewed many stars, and perhaps had grown somewhat jaded, finding that their brand of cinematic magic, in the reality of a hotel room or a restaurant during an interview, was less than luminescent. But the idea of interviewing Davis was quite a different story. From an extremely early age, she was my idol, embodying those qualities I admired and ultimately found myself lacking in: charm, aggression, cleverness, lack of vanity, downright meanness, distinct personal style and so on.

Since, in April 1989, the Film Society of Lincoln Center was going to honour Davis at their annual gala, I secured an

assignment from a large circulation, mainstream magazine to do a 2,000-word interview. The format would be Q&A, or question-and-answer. After some lengthy negotiation through Davis' assistant, Kathryn Sermak, a date was agreed upon. Davis had made several demands, among which was interview approval. Since the Q&A would be more or less a verbatim transcription of the tape, I saw no problem in that. I had not, however, counted on dealing with Bette Davis.

As promised, I sent her the edited tape transcription of our three-hour conversation which she returned to me rewritten, with most of the juice and heart extracted from it. I was appalled. I begged, pleaded. I even threatened, in my own cowering way. Her lawyer stood firm. 'You know how she is,' he told me. 'She always gets her own way.' The magazine, none too pleased, was forced to run the interview as Bette wanted it.

How could my idol do this to me? To paraphrase Baby Jane Hudson from *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 'But she did, Blanche, she did.'

What is most interesting about the interview is, of course, what Davis chose to edit from the manuscript. There was no doubt about it: she was, especially for a woman of her age and in her frail state of health, extremely giving of her time during the actual interview. But she had second thoughts about how she wanted to present herself to the public; and after she got through with her rewrite, you couldn't see the real portrait for all the *pentimento* in it.

Of all the major actresses, Davis was the one who could most easily be termed an auteur. From very early in her career she fought for, and got, artistic control, which must be distinguished from 'star' control. Oh yes, there were flashes of temperament from Davis, but her main concerns had to do with the roles she played. Like any driven artist, she became obsessed with work. Our interview served to reveal even further how much like an auteur Davis thought, and how this attention to *mise en scène* spilled over into her life.

What didn't get written about either, in the Q&A, was what it was like to be with Davis, and since this interview was the last extensive one she did before she died, perhaps it's appropriate to get it down right, finally.

That Valentine's Day morning I scoured Los Angeles for gardenias, her favourite flower, but they were nowhere to be

The Anniversary.



# happened to

# DAVIS

## O'TOOLE

found: a cold spell had killed them all. It being Valentine's Day, I settled on a dozen red roses, and arrived at the address in the Hollywood Hills, aka the Swish Alps due to its hearty homosexual population. I can only report that I was startled, after pressing the code numbers to the apartment, to hear that unmistakably breathy Yankee voice, rising and falling in slightly choked cadences and aspirations. 'Mistah O'Toole, I'm going to buzz you in. Come up to the fourth floor.'

Like an old and wizened Bette Davis doll, she 'made an entrance' from another room, cigarette held between two gnarled fingers like a sceptre. Her handshake was, to say the least, healthy. The royal-blue dress she wore drew attention to her cobalt-blue eyes, and she accepted the flowers, thanking me, taking one stem for herself, and handing the rest to Kathryn Sermak.

'I tried to find gardenias—' 'They're all dead,' she replied, sounding like a parody of Bette Davis. A refreshment was offered. I declined. She sat. Then I sat, about fifty yards away. A large painting of Davis as Margo Channing from *All About Eve* stared down at us. Davis lit another cigarette. She coughed. It was deep and rasping enough to put the fear of God in a heathen. The interview began.

Immediately she let it be known that she was 'irritated' that Lincoln Center had 'ignored' her for so long (this was changed to mild 'disappointment' in Davis' edition). Once she got this off her chest, I asked her what character came closest to being like herself. Her immediate answer was Kit Marlowe, the writer from *Old Acquaintance*, which is certainly interesting from the point of view of Davis as her own auteur. Kit Marlowe, like Bette Davis, was always one to call the shots in her own life.

In a way Kit Marlowe—talented, sophisticated, tolerant, extremely good-humoured in the face of her best friend Miriam Hopkins' egotism and controlling manner—can be seen as Davis dealing with the Hollywood studio system, so it's little wonder she has such identification with the role. Like Kit Marlowe ('I feel very old and very lonely this morning. Do you ever feel that way?'), Davis banished her personal blues by throwing herself into her career; she went through men quickly (four marriages) as if they were a cheap deck of cards.

'Well, you know,' Davis offered, 'I've often wished that some of the mean

women I've played—that I had the courage to be quite as mean.' Speaking of mean women, I mention that she doesn't care very much for Rosa Moline, the American version of Emma Bovary she plays in King Vidor's moody and high-strung *Beyond the Forest*, a film nowadays greeted as high camp and boasting the most famous Bette line, 'What a dump!'

'That's how I obtained my release from Warner Brothers,' Davis recalled craftily. 'I had ten more years left in my contract.' What Davis had to say about her dislike of the film, although I'm very fond of it myself, makes sense. 'It was a fine book, but certainly the husband was not Joseph Cotten. Who would leave that darling, lovely man? Who would hate him? The character in the book was a Eugene Pallette type—a horrible, rich, fat man in a little town. I thought casting Cotten was a terrible mistake. If, after eighteen years, they didn't have any more faith in my judgment,

*The Whales of August.*



ment, I really must go my own way and try my wings, I thought.'

Of course Rosa Moline comes off as rather too extreme; even the film's admirers admit that. Davis' comments are not only those of an actress, but an adapter's and director's as well. She not only kept an eagle eye on what happened in front of the cameras, but on the periphery as well: 'There were certain areas I was very particular about. Advertising, for example. The posters for *The Corn Is Green* showed a very sexy woman's body in a black satin dress. How long would it take an audience to know it was a lie? In ten minutes they'd see a middle-aged schoolteacher.'

Davis believed, quite rightly, that 'the movies were a terrific chance for realism.' She was not averse to ageing, sometimes horribly, as Fanny Skeffington did, Fanny being a sort of dry-run for Jane Hudson's shocking cosmetics in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*. 'There, I think, is my biggest claim to fame,' crows Davis. One thinks of her ugly duckling Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager* who turns swan coming down the gangway of the cruise ship in Rio. Or another Charlotte—the aged, sublimely self-sacrificing one in *The Old Maid*.

She feels she comes off better than most other actresses from the past. 'The women who wore the very high fashions—lots and lots of headdresses and all that—can look pretty funny today. I basically wore classic clothes. So I don't look outdated. A hat or a

wardrobe can be a terrific rival.' Davis' vision goes beyond that of the actress; she is talking, once again, of *mise en scène*.

The time came to talk of cigarettes. 'It

ing to be perceived. Personal and professional disgruntlement aside, my greatest disappointment lay in the knowledge that Bette Davis ultimately cared about what people thought of her

and, not moving a muscle to help him, coldly watches him die. Davis actually betrays little emotion and allows the audience to feel everything: her lack of feeling colourless in its futility.

# DOUBLE TAKES

J. J. Hunsecker on critical fashions, the films Goldcrest never made and a case of spectacles

## STARS AND BLOBS

Critics are always talking about films having been underrated when they were first released, a comment that is particularly easy to make because it is so difficult to check. But there are methods. When Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller* was re-released earlier this year, it was generally hailed as a masterpiece, an example of Hollywood's riches in the early 1970s. Interestingly, a check back to 1973 showed that the contemporary responses were not quite so generous. On its back cover the *Monthly Film Bulletin* used to run a table of critics' verdicts on the month's films. This was a simple star system applied to each film, ranging from a maximum of four down to a black blob indicating disapproval. The better-known critics were not impressed by *McCabe*. Derek Malcolm (who interviewed Altman about the reissue in the *Guardian*) and Gavin Millar awarded it two stars and Alexander Walker only one.

It's now difficult to assess the reception of a particular old film without an inordinate amount of research in the newspaper files. The MFB's tables have acquired considerable usefulness because they give a sense of critical opinion, of changing fashions, in a relatively compact form. It is intriguing now to see that, in the last month before the item was dropped in 1975, no critic awarded *Jaws* more than two stars.

Flicking through issues of the magazine, one quickly becomes aware that certain directors have only come into fashion in the years after their films were released. Sergio Leone was one victim, or beneficiary, of this process. Neither *A Fistful of Dynamite* nor *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* managed more than one star from any critic. *Once Upon a Time in the West* scored less well in the month it appeared than Peter Hall's execrable *Three into Two Won't Go*. Conversely, it is difficult to believe that the reputation of a film like *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, peppered with four-star ratings, will survive.

There are certain intriguing individual judgments. That Richard Roud dismissed Bergman's masterpiece *The Shame* with a blob, and that Gavin Millar did the same with Clint Eastwood's *Play Misty for Me*. The real interest, though, is to observe the shifts of perception that slowly seem to occur over time. If the example of Derek Malcolm is now considered, this is just because he is the only member of the regular panel who is still a national critic.

He awarded two stars to the following

list of films, presumably considering them mediocre: *American Graffiti*, *The Culpepper Cattle Company*, *Dillinger*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Duel*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Little Big Man*, *Le Mépris*, *Targets*, *Two Lane Blacktop* and *The Wild Bunch*. Not a bad collection, it might be thought, and the same might be said of the following, to which he awarded just one star: *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, *Play Misty for Me*, *Prime Cut*, *The Producers* and *Z*. Admittedly, though, *Garcia* is one of those films that turns up both on 'best' and 'worst' lists (another example is John Boorman's extraordinary *Exorcist II: The Heretic*). It must also be borne in mind that Malcolm's standards were sterner than those of his colleagues. In all his years of assessment he only once awarded a film four stars—to Luis Buñuel's *Tristana*.

It's not difficult to imagine the reasons for the feature being abolished. Perhaps it was considered trivial, the sort of consumer item that had no place in the pages of a serious film magazine. But I can't imagine that many people used it as a guide to what was on (and it would have been a pretty dubious guide at that, since the critics frequently diverged in their opinions to an almost alarming extent). The MFB is the principal journal of record of films released in Britain, and the record of the critical response is a crucial part of this. It would be an excellent idea if the *Monthly Film Bulletin* restored the item.

## THE LONGEST TUNNEL

The countdown used in launching spaceships was famously invented not by a scientist but by Fritz Lang for his 1926 movie *The Woman on the Moon*. This device to create suspense was taken over by NASA; demonstrating, perhaps, that space travel was as much about fantasy and factitious drama as about technology. There are other famous examples of films fictionalising reality and reality then adopting the fiction. The most obvious is that of the gangster world, which was strongly influenced by screen villains from Paul Muni to Marlon Brando. Gangsters also happily adopted slang that Raymond Chandler had made up, notably the term the 'big sleep'.

A more complicated example occurred to me while reading Alan Burgess' *The Longest Tunnel*, a fascinating history of the mass escape during the Second World War from the Sagan prisoner of war camp, the episode on which John Sturges' *The Great Escape* was based.

Burgess' account surprised me because it confirmed the remarkable accuracy of the film version. Admittedly, there is no mention of any prisoner escaping on a motorbike (though no connoisseur of movie trivia would wish that sequence unmade: Steve McQueen reputedly did the stunt for a German pursuer as well as his own, thus creating what must be a rare example of a leading actor chasing himself on screen). There is also no mention of a blind POW being among the escapers (as Donald Pleasence).

Furthermore, though the film accurately shows just three prisoners escaping to freedom, the successful POWs were not in reality a claustrophobic

McCabe and Mrs Miller.



# DOUBLE TAKES

Czech tunneller (Charles Bronson), a British pop star (John Leyton) and an Australian speaking no French or German and apparently incapable of much English beyond the phrase 'bloody good'. More plausibly, they were two Norwegians and a Dutchman, and crucial to their success was their fluent command of both German and the languages of countries that the Germans had occupied.

The details of the planning and execution of the escape, however, are remarkably faithful to the original, and I was particularly struck by the method of soil dispersal demonstrated in the film by David McCallum. Dirt from the tunnels was placed in long sacks suspended within the trousers or greatcoat of a prisoner, who then strolled over to the cabbage patch where a reliable old character actor like James Donald was displaying a stiff upper lip to the commandant. When the commandant had strolled on, the prisoner released the dirt on to the ground.

Burgess confirms that this was indeed a method used with great success. What is more curious—and not mentioned by Burgess—is that this is also the method used in Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, which had been released in 1937. Did the pows perhaps get the idea from the film?

Film influencing life can easily be seen as a joke. At the Oxford Union debating society in the 1950s a wit once introduced Dennis Wheatley, author of *The Devil Rides Out*, by announcing, as if in tribute, that he had not only read all Wheatley's books but had also seen the films on which they were based. On a more elevated level, it has been reliably reported that Sweden's greatest wartime hero, Raoul Wallenberg, was at least partly inspired by a wish to emulate the Leslie Howard role in *Pimpernel Smith*, which he had seen early in the war. Indeed, his later efforts to save Hungarian Jews strikingly resemble scenes from the film.

We all know what a wonderful subject Hollywood found in the prison camp experience. It would have been interesting if Burgess had at least considered the possibility that the pows had been influenced by earlier war films. However, he does provide the information that allows us to make connections of our own. I particularly relished the discovery that Wally Floody, one of the camp's principal tunnel-diggers, had before the war worked in a Canadian goldmine owned by Sir Harry Oakes, whose murder in the Bahamas in 1941 was the subject of Nicolas Roeg's *Eureka*.

David Thomson's intriguing novel *Suspects* explored the notion of famous movie characters leaking into each other's stories. I suspect he might relish the idea of this real man uniting two such different films. It's as incongruous as Frank Harris, crony of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, being imper-



John Sturges directing  
*The Great Escape*.

sonated by Jack Lemmon in the Western *Cowboy*; or, for that matter, the attendance by Oscar Wilde at the sale of the late Jesse James' effects during his tour of America.

A suggestive anthology of films could be compiled featuring incongruous meetings of this kind. Between Steve McQueen's Tom Horn and Gentleman Jim Sullivan in the underrated *Tom Horn*; Charlie Parker ringing Stravinsky's doorbell in *Bird*; even, perhaps, George M. Cohan telling his life story to President Roosevelt as the framing device of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. But enough: this is already starting to sound too much like an E. L. Doctorow novel.

Cowboy: Jack Lemmon as Frank Harris.



## GHOSTS FROM GOLDCREST

If everyone whose ambition it was to enter the British film industry was compelled to read *My Indecision Is Final: The Rise and Fall of Goldcrest* by Jake Eberts and Terry Iott (Faber, £17.50), the hordes of aspiring filmmakers would slow to a trickle. This would partly be due to the book's 650-page length, the sort of tome Samuel Goldwyn had in mind when he said: 'Read it? I can't even lift it.'

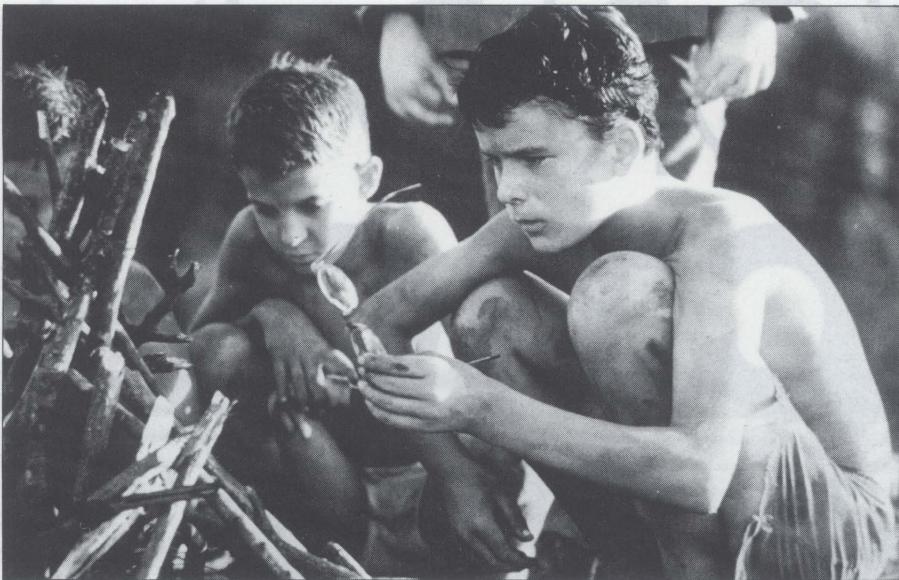
More than this, it is the grimmest tale of cinematic self-destruction since Steven Bach's account of the *Heaven's Gate* saga a few years ago. The best parts of both books concern that strange period when a major film has begun shooting and seems to escape the direct control of anyone at all. For a small company to have one expensive, troubled project in production might look like misfortune; to have two might look like carelessness, but to have three—*Absolute Beginners*, *The Mission* and *Revolution*—as Goldcrest did in the year leading up to its demise, is incredible and seems even more so after reading this account.

At the beginning of Sherlock Holmes' stories, Watson used to talk tantalisingly about the fascinating cases—such as that concerning the giant rat of Sumatra—which he would never be able to communicate to the reader because they were still too sensitive. In a similar way, this book is haunted by a strange breed of ghost: all those films that were planned but ended up not being made. There was Marek Kanievski's *Horror Movie*, which apparently had a brilliant script (though admittedly some senior Goldcrest executives thought that *Revolution* had a brilliant script). There was—bizarrely perhaps—a comedy version of *Joan of Arc*.

There was Richard Attenborough's *Tom Paine*, delayed by *Revolution*, but now finally to be made. There was a film version of J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, an Al Pacino vehicle called *Crystal Clear*, Alan J. Pakula's *Spring Moon*, a musical set in Africa called *Dream Song*. And then there were films that appear as little more than titles: *The Lightship*, *Toys*, *Trojans*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Mandrake*. Perhaps there is a better universe somewhere on some slightly higher plane of existence where judgment on cinematic matters is sounder and therefore in which *Absolute Beginners* and *Revolution* were cancelled at an early stage of development, Goldcrest survived and all these other films got made.

The history of cinema is full of these tantalising non-films. It sometimes seems that a director's pet project, the one for which he is most suited, is precisely the one he can never finally make. Will Stanley Kubrick ever get around to the biopic of Napoleon that he has spent so much of his career working

# DOUBLE TAKES



*Lord of the Flies*: no way to light a fire.

on? Orson Welles' first project in Hollywood was an adaptation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—perhaps its story of genius corrupted would have been too grimly prophetic.

Judging by the accounts of its preparation, Hitchcock's version of the George Blake escape took his identification with the perverse, criminal mind so far that it could not possibly have been filmed. John Boorman failed to film *Lord of the Rings*, but all his movies ever since could plausibly be seen as distorted fragments of the masterpiece that might have been. (In the same way Nicolas Roeg was fired from *Flash Gordon* shortly before shooting began, but then claimed that he made *Bad Timing* on precisely the same themes.)

Fred Zinnemann spent years working on a screen version of André Malraux's novel *La Condition Humaine*, and Joseph Losey's *Proust* exists only as a brief, elliptical and brilliant screenplay by Harold Pinter. (Why, incidentally, is the Pinter who wrote screenplays for Losey so superior to the Pinter who wrote screenplays for anyone else?)

One of the most tantalising of unmade films is Howard Hawks' adaptation of Henry Hathaway's *Fourteen Hours*, a drama about a man standing on a ledge contemplating suicide. Hawks planned to remake it as a comedy, in which a man caught with another man's wife leaps out on to the ledge and pretends to be suicidal. Oddly enough, though, this fine comic idea did reach the Hollywood screen, by a circuitous route. It was used by Yves Robert in *Pardon Mon Affaire* and then repeated when the film was remade as *The Woman in Red*.

Other unmade films may seem less regrettable. United Artists paid \$2 million for the film rights to Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbour's Wife* and planned to turn it into the first Hollywood feature film with hardcore sex scenes (William Friedkin was to direct), but it was a

casualty of the *Heaven's Gate* fiasco.

Perhaps most intriguing of all is *Storm in the West*, Dore Schary and Sinclair Lewis' reworking of the Second World War as a Western. The script has been published and Stalin figures as Joel Slavin, a Civil War veteran from Georgia (a hammer and sickle are, of course, seen dangling from his wagon). Chamberlain was Ned Chambers. America became Ulysses Sanders, a manager of the local store who remained neutral until his daughter Pearl was raped. Presumably most of these projects are still available for filming. Any takers out there?

## MATCH ME

It would be inappropriate to bring my year as a columnist to a close without a final note of nit-picking pedantry. The literary critic Christopher Ricks has pointed out that William Golding made an optical mistake in *Lord of the Flies*. Piggy's spectacles are used by the boys to light fires and therefore become a crucial tool which they fight over. But Piggy was short-sighted and glasses to correct short-sightedness do not converge rays of light.

In his fine new adaptation of Golding's novel, the director Harry Hook has taken over the mistake, but of course in a film the mistake must become deliberate. Golding presumably never attempted to light a fire with a pair of glasses, but in the film we see the impossible being done. Therefore a special fake pair of glasses must have been constructed, with a magnifying glass substituted for the normal lens.

So that's that. Match me, Sydney. (And not as a recent TV previewer said when *Sweet Smell of Success* was last broadcast, 'Cigarette me, Sydney,' which is rather like quoting the famous line from *Casablanca*, 'Play it a couple more times, Sam.')

J. J. HUNSECKER

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# A WORLD IN INACTION



PHOTO: GRACE ROBERTSON

**'We must accept the idea that cinema is different from TV and that the way to a better understanding of its true potential is not that of aping the cinema, which in turn leads the cinema to aim for products that are suitable for television; the circularity of this relationship is unproductive and very depressing indeed.'**

BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI

The relationship between cinema and television grew increasingly symbiotic in the 1980s, as television companies invested heavily in feature filmmaking, while the cinema often attuned itself to the expectations of an audience

primarily used to watching television. Scriptwriters in particular (though significantly not directors) began to see their work as interchangeable between the two media. Some like Dennis Potter wrote first for television and then

## DAVID RUSSELL

re-edited the same material for the cinema. The result was invariably a confirmation that television drama and cinema drama have much less in common than was originally thought. It is worth reflecting on some of the reasons for this.

It is not true that many things have

to happen in a television play. In the cinema the rhythm of action is crucial since the big screen magnifies its effects and dynamics, but on the small screen of television the impact of action is much less. It is rather speech which is of prime importance; people want to hear other people speaking, explaining, telling their stories and giving their views. Hence the existence of so many chat-shows or game-shows based around people talking.

Even the action sequences of sport are guided or 'homed' by a commentator and these days also a professional 'expert', offering us an anchoring point of view (thus the US term, *anchorman*). In fact this idea of 'giving one's view'

(verbally articulating a vision) is central to television, which requires the constant presence of a voice, of a point of view, preferably several, since a single one can be tendentious and potentially undemocratic.

In television, photographed action is always predicated on human speech, so that the televisual image is always part of a verbal rhetoric. In other words the televisual image is always *literal*—it aims to be a visual facsimile of what is spoken.

This may appear paradoxical—to match an image to a word? But it is to solve this paradox that television, which developed out of radio, was introduced. Semiotics has distinguished between iconic and symbolic signs: an icon (such as a photograph) has some necessary relation to the thing it represents (e.g. shape), whereas a symbol (such as a word) has an arbitrary relation (as the word 'cow' has to an actual cow). Television attempts to map symbols on to icons and vice versa. It seeks to give words a visual appearance and images a spoken meaning.

If recent television drama has tended very much towards expressionism in its techniques (the omnipresent *film noir* pastiche), this is because in expressionism the image is particularly literal—the (symbolic) 'meaning' of the (iconic) image is rendered with unusual clarity through high stylisation, as the *mise en scène* (lighting, dress, camera angles, etc) tends unequivocally towards literalness (low-angle means menace, high-angle means godlike view, red means passion, black means danger, shadow means ambiguity). Small wonder that expressionism has now been virtually taken over as stock technique by television and advertising—the two industries with the single greatest investment in making images correspond with words.

## FROM RADIO TO TELLYPHONE

Television is a medium of monologue or dialogue, of *speech*, which is not the same thing as language, since televisual speech operates within completely secular conventions of limitation (there is no incantatory element). It is a truism that TV works best in close or medium-shot, but in fact no shot is possible in TV without speech. It is speech that is in constant close-up, and television is, in reality, no more than a telephone, without an input channel and programmed to produce a background visual accompaniment, something frequently emphasised in manuals compiled by the professionals: 'A TV programme can... be regarded as an expensive and elaborate "person to person call", however many million such isolated viewers are reached in the aggregate' (Kurt Lewenhak, Head of Television Training, Visnews in 1984).

As for the visual accompaniment, it can be compared with the role of music

in (some) silent cinema: an ambience for words, its tasks are to illustrate, provide atmosphere, sensory input and support for what is being said. And just as the music of that silent cinema was formulaic (though still effective), so, too, is action on the television screen: so many car chases, so many pints drunk in pubs, so many shoot-outs or punch-ups, so many hospital operations, visits to the seaside, scenes of couples in double-beds.

This highly limited set of conventions, operating as it does through codes of familiarity and cliché, is not perceived as a disability, since originality at the level of action would be difficult to assimilate. Familiarity, on the other hand, is absolutely crucial to the televisual experience. Television is a family medium, existing within a domesticated space, and if dialogue and speech are omnipresent and all-determining, it is because they are our first link with the most familiar thing of all, the language of the community.

Television continuously broadcasts this language saturated with the familiar (as, of course, it has to be in order to be understood by everyone). The pleasure of television is to experience and re-experience this familiarity in predictable ways, at one's leisure, and thereby to feel linked with one's fellow tribesmen, listening to the voice of the 'village', global or otherwise, without of course leaving one's home. There is, for example, no televisual equivalent of the cinematic experience of a Travis in Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*, wishing to be 'far away, lost in a deep, vast country where nobody knew him, somewhere without language or streets.' In television no such place exists or can exist.

## TALKING HEADS AND MOVING PARTS

In Alan Bennett's television drama *A Woman of No Importance* (1982), nothing happens except that a woman speaks to camera. This is an extreme, but it is a good example of what we have been saying about the relative unimportance of action, as opposed to speech. There are, of course, many great cinema films in which characters talk extensively—the comedies of Eric Rohmer, for example. Seeing Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud* was a revelation to Trevor Griffiths: 'I was thrilled by talk, by the fact that people could actually talk and still hold interest. It was a belief I'd held for some time.' Yet there are some very important differences between televisual and cinematic dialogue, and Bennett's drama would present insuperable problems for the cinema, while the subtleties of Rohmer's comedies frequently evaporate from the television screen.

Despite the apparently static quality of Rohmer's conversational set-pieces (often at dining tables), a great deal of action is going on beneath, during and often in spite of the words spoken.

Glances are exchanged, hair is touched nervously, intonation is modulated, the flow of speech is varied, interrupted by food. As is well known, Rohmer likes to improvise a lot of these scenes, so that the elements of uncertainty, hesitation and unpredictability intrinsic to his dramatic encounters can be invented with some freshness by the actors themselves.

Moreover, Rohmer has a fondness for continuous filming of characters listening while people are talking to them out of shot (the very opposite of the shot/reverse-shot formula of TV filming), in order to reveal thoughts, actions and feelings which are *unsaid*. Rohmer is an absolute master at filming dialogue in this cinematic way, and it is not surprising that Trevor Griffiths was filled with such enthusiasm. But the real point is that Rohmer's comedies involve creating an ironic *disjunction* between what a character says about him or herself and what is actually done.

Here we have a major difference with television drama. If what is seen on television is always anchored in what is said, then this kind of disjunction cannot take place. It is not surprising, after all, that television is firmly wedded to the shot/reverse-shot, since this is one of the mainstay techniques whereby the conjunction of word and image (the two saying exactly the same thing) is celebrated. The idea that what is seen must always conform to, and not digress from or contradict what is said, is not only a central feature of the televisual form, it is what makes the whole notion of 'truthful' television possible. For if

Alan Bennett's *A Woman of No Importance*: Patricia Routledge.



there is no dissonance between what is seen and what is said, if the rhetoric of the image is identical to the rhetoric of the word, then a televisual truth, which resembles a documentary truth, is achieved. No matter that in this process the visual is no more than a doubling of the verbal, a tautology along the lines of what is seen is what is said is what is seen.

In a televisual dramatisation of one of Rohmer's dining scenes there would be drastic differences. Out would go improvisation for a start. Characters would be more identifiable and signposted as class and cultural stereotypes, as part of an appeal to tribalism, and they would speak rehearsed and non-overlapping lines uninterrupted, as in the theatre. Even the least articulate would have no problem in forming perfect sentences which flowed without pause and revealed remarkable condensation of thought and feeling. The food would be left uneaten so as not to spoil the lines with inaudibility. Above all the characters' bodies (except for the talking heads) would be static, like the camera. Probably lots of 'jokes' would be made, or perhaps these days a camera might track around the table, for no other good reason than that the scene seems otherwise a bit dead and boring.

Some examples? Well, any of the interminable wine-drinking meals in the BBC's recent mega-series *A Sense of Guilt*, whose pretence of middle-class seriousness, a kind of drama for *Daily Mail* readers, was the only thing which prevented it from having recourse to that other great English TV drama cliché, the sense of humour. And as so often in these depressingly suburban chamber pieces involving members of the idle professions, one of whom is almost inevitably a writer, the desiccated lives of its protagonists are spoken in a flat BBC monotone which is itself an index of two boredom: that which the characters feel for themselves, and that induced in us by this world in inaction.

Robert Towne, whose *Chinatown* is widely considered one of the great post-war American screenplays, commented in an interview that television teaches you to write badly because you have to write about what you are seeing, namely 'the problem'. There is no chance to create any subtext to a scene, because subtext exists in the *unsaid*, and the televisual form demands that what is seen is always anchored by what is being *said*. What is seen, therefore, is always an argument, a stage in a set of verbal propositions designed to set out and dramatise a 'problem', which is why so many television dramas are no more than arguments between people, squabbles within families or relationships. Hence, too, the idea that a television play examines a sociological problem, such as homelessness, unemployment, homosexuality, deviance, drug abuse, abortion, the National Health Service or whatever. The soap-

opera has become the perfect synthesis of these twin televisual demands of problems and squabbles, which is why, of course, it is such successful television.

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

If the problems that concern television drama are principally sociological in origin, this is because television sees itself as a democratic forum (one of its inheritances from radio) and its speech is subsequently entirely secularised. The importance of the family and the familiar mean that television is caught at the interface between the everyday-personal, in its emotional and physical

dimensions, and the social world, and is therefore constantly trading in secular definitions of right and wrong. If television is often referred to as a melodramatic medium (principally, but not uniquely, in its dramatic expressions), then it is above all in this focus on families and how to survive them that it most clearly links up with traditions of melodrama.

Yet it is precisely because of its secularised idiom that television is unable to make the crucial link with the strongest and most binding forms of melodrama, namely those that transcend the social order (e.g. realism) and operate in another orbit altogether,



where demonic forces of good and evil exhaust themselves and the sacred springs of life itself are at stake. Of course the soap-opera, of all televiual forms, has attempted to enter this orbit, and yet it has two serious liabilities: its *mise en scène* (in which only strongly localised pockets of social-realism are possible) and the never-ending time-structure which prevents forces from exhausting themselves, and makes melodramatic catharsis impossible. This is yet another crucial difference from the cinema, which is not required to occupy such a secular position and can therefore appeal directly to the unconscious, to the imagination, to anthropological myth and to sexual desire.

One of the depressing aspects of the circularity which Bertolucci refers to when the cinema starts to produce televiual products is not, therefore, the phenomenon of 'wordiness' (it is in the particular use of words rather than in

their quantity that television distinguishes itself), but in the acceptance of this highly limited set of over-familiar and 'small-screen' conventions, wherein unremarkable actions and characters, tribal stereotypes and situations of repetitive banality find themselves blown up to cinematic proportions. The result, Bertolucci notes, is *Kramer versus Kramer*. In the UK it is perhaps *Wilt*.

The appeal of much of today's American cinema towards families and family experiences is another revealing example of the influence of television. If one of the key preoccupations of the TV series *Thirtysomething* is to refind a familial role for characters who, in theory at least, belong to a generation which rejected the family, then the ways in which this problem is currently being worried over, in films like *When Harry Met Sally... or Parenthood*, are signs of the profound influence of this award-winning TV series. *Thirtysome-*

*thing* is in some ways a limit-case, with a production team full of graduates from top film schools, and a keen desire to emulate cinematic masters such as Woody Allen, Akira Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman. Yet nobody could mistake *Thirtysomething*, however sophisticated its stylistic references, for cinema: in fact that very sophistication is a sign of its lack of cinematic urgency.

In this country, and given the prestige that British television enjoys, it is more common for television to seek to ennoble itself by claiming a status of equality with the cinema. This claim is usually based on simplified perceptions of what constitute 'cinematic techniques' (as though cinema were nothing more than a set of techniques), such as 'arty' camera movements, expressionistic lighting, long takes, modernistic montage and striking angles. The result is invariably pretentiousness, based on a profound misalliance of two distinctly separate forms. We have recently been treated to such a spectacle in Dennis Potter's *Blackeyes* (1989), and it is quite common for this kind of mutant to receive the dubious accolade of 'quality television drama', something the BBC is apparently keen not to see vanish in the age of de-regulation, despite what the public might make of it.

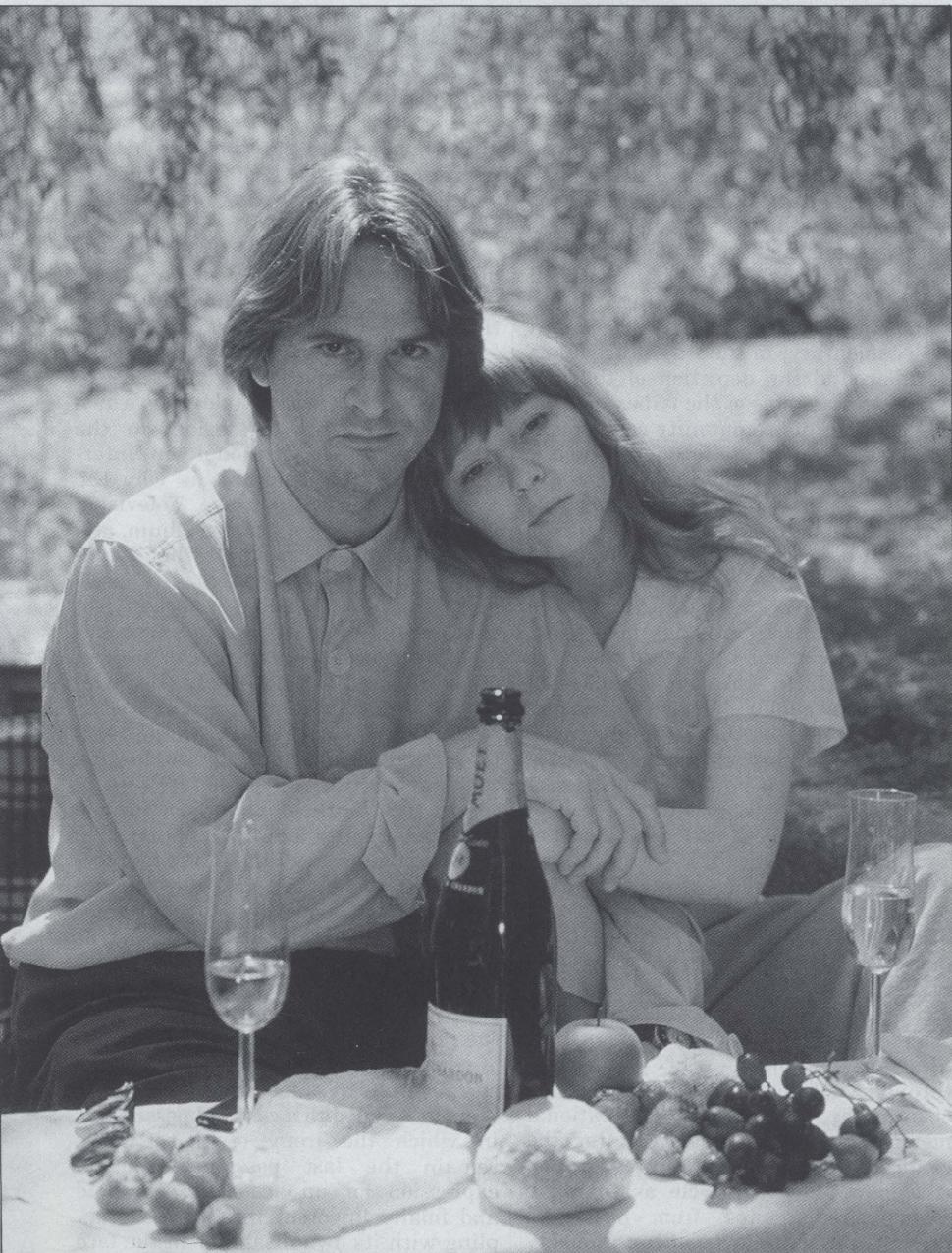
## BUT IS IT TELEVISION?

This question of 'quality drama' is one of the most vexed for a television establishment about to undergo massive re-evaluation. Quite what 'quality television' means beyond parochial but well-produced costume dramas has never yet been adequately defined; it has, however, become clear from a recent poll carried out by the *Media Show* on Channel 4 that the general public are a great deal less concerned about its survival than television executives. But then this was always bound to be the case, given the aspirations of many of the more Leavisite members of that postwar cultural class towards what Joan Bakewell used to refer to as the New Priesthood.

It is ironic that this debate about 'quality drama', which frequently resorts to elitism and artificial distinctions between high and low cultural artifacts, is taking place in television, itself one of the 'lower' cultural forms. After all, one of the reasons Dennis Potter's work is considered 'quality' drama is that it refuses to allow itself to fall to anything as low as 'popular television', whose traditional fare receives nothing but scorn from Potter's pen and mouth, while bemused but admiring critics make absurd comparisons with the cinema in an attempt to explain why this television-which-isn't-television is so worth watching.

Yet there is no reason for television to be ashamed of its popularity, which is based on a realisation of its strengths and limitations. Television can and does represent the language of the tribe, and

Left: Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud*: 'uncertainty and unpredictability'. Below, left: Dennis Potter's *Blackeyes*. Below: A Sense of Guilt: 'quality dramas' of worlds in inaction.



its potential for actuality broadcasting is without equal, which is why Bertolucci argues a strong case for further development of this potential rather than imitation of the cinema: 'Television should transmit everything live; not just the Olympic Games or parts of their news bulletins. They should show plays on a stage, operas, open-air or indoor concerts, parliamentary committee meetings, trials, prizes and special events. It should maximise the only virtue it has over the cinema; a capillary diffusion all over the world. This is so powerful that over and above showing the events, it can even make them happen.'

Television's main power lies in the field of documentary events, which it not only records, but, as Bertolucci remarks, creates. Even its dramas are in some sense attempts at documentaries, not just in the 'committed' social realist vein of Jeremy Sandford's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) or Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982), but also in the intermittently non-naturalistic work of Dennis Potter, whose *Blackeyes* is offered as a play about the contemporary sexual exploitation of women. Beneath television drama lies its sociological, documentary aspiration, its attempt to be a part of the forming of contemporary history and historiography. Even the producers of *thirtysomething* continually refer to their product as a kind of document of a generation, and mention with pride that it is used as a therapy aid by psychoanalysts and marriage guidance counsellors, much as Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (which is a key inspiration not just for *thirtysomething* but for almost all contemporary 'adult' American 'relationship films') was used and discussed over a decade ago.

When our television executives worry about the future of the documentary in the age of de-regulation, this suggests a profound lack of understanding of their own medium. Television is and always will be a documentary medium; it is just that the form and experience of documentary has undergone massive change since those days of the 1950s when documentary meant a highly cultured Oxbridge outsider with vaguely socialist leanings standing back and observing the loss of a paternalistic but liberal utopia. Much has happened since the days of Humphrey Jennings, in particular the accession to power of television, though you wouldn't believe it when you see the products of many of today's practitioners of British television documentary. But whether they and their bureaucratic overseers take cognisance of it or not, documentary has changed and it is now to be found everywhere and in everything television can gain access to. Television is documentary, and as it changes so the nature of documentary changes, without that relationship being in any way impaired.

Much more problematic is the status of 'quality drama', because, to repeat a



Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, a key inspiration for ...

question Geoffrey Nowell-Smith posed in 1984 about the future of British Cinema, it must now be asked, 'But do we really need it?' The question is hardly rhetorical, given the way the channel-selecting fingers of the Great British Public have been voting.

Inasmuch as television drama is part of documentary, in the way it organises itself around the depiction of the language and customs of the tribe, focusing on domestic and community concerns, it will continue in those forms to which it is obviously most suited and which are clearly the most televisual: soap-opera and situation comedy. There will also be successful series based around tribal stereotypes which continue to amuse and interest their constituency. Then there will be those other forms—sport, the game-show, the talk-show, the news analysis—which involve dramas of actuality, arguably television's unique capability. Finally, there will always be room for the costume-drama, because television depends on being able to root itself and its viewers into a sense of history which is both its own and part of a national culture.

In fact, television aspires towards reading its own history as the national history, and vice versa. Witness the numerous television histories of 'the Sixties', 'the Seventies', 'the Eighties', etc. To say nothing, of course, of 'The War'. This is perhaps the singlemost ideological function of television; through the formation and transmission of an archive which serves as national memory, it is steadily overcoming the evanescence of its utterances, which it is now able to recycle as so many 'remembered quotes' from past and present. In fact, television can probably

already claim to be the writer and rewriter of World History, a history which is simply written on the air, across the sky.

Given that one part of that history is dynamic and shifting at an ever-increasing pace, namely that part called the present, there will always be a need for a slower and more reflective depiction of history in order to give a sense of gravity and narrative to television's own traditions and, by extension, to the traditions of the national or international culture, and this is why the costume-drama will survive. Television is, after all, a post-modern medium, and simulations of the past, or what Baudrillard calls *la mode rétro*, are post-modernism's favoured forms of expression—for even (perhaps especially) post-modernism needs history in order to avoid self-destructing by wiping out its own past.

What there doesn't seem to me room for is what is called 'quality drama', and that is because, in purely televisual terms, it is neither quality nor drama. It is not quality television because if television is a medium that embraces its own contemporary history without a sense of guilt, then guilt-ridden dramas of sexual and social frustration, such as those of Dennis Potter and other Angry and now not so Young Men, for whom the very popularity of television poses the problem of a fallen medium in need of redemption, cannot fail to be a curiosity, or even an anachronism. For only if one is wedded to a cultural pessimism, in which the irony of these works remain the last possible forms of expression for an academic, paranoid and finally impotent intelligence grappling with its own disability in the face

GAVIN MULCAHY  
MICHAEL POWELL

can never hope to explore. The reason it cannot explore them is that television is itself caught up in two specific movements of time. The first is called history, which manifests itself through the actuality of channels and scheduling, and which no one programme can ever stand apart from. The second is the story-time of spoken language, which continues to be read out in television (from scripts and auto-cues) just as on the radio.

Television's history is a history that must be spoken and spoken clearly and distinctly, whatever form it takes, from the situation comedy to the in-depth news analysis. Under these two pressures, the historical and the oral, it is not surprising that television can only fill time and channel it, rather than master it (except, perhaps, retroactively, in the costume-drama). In the cinema, on the other hand, time itself is 'sculpted', as Tarkovsky would say, into new forms and rhythms, hence it is only in the cinema that the dramatic dimension of time can be structured with a plastic creativity. The same is true of movement, which can only exist in time, and which television never creates, only responds to.

If it is true that advertising aims at a compromise between television and cinema, using the iconography of the latter in the form of the former, it can only do so by marking off one brief time-scale (thirty seconds) as its own. Nevertheless, even this time has been eroded by the demands of money, the visibility of the product, the juxtaposition of other adverts, other programmes and hence other time-scales, and then, finally, by its own repetition, in the next commercial break, wherein it nullifies itself without trace. Moreover even this first thirty seconds is unable

to 'take its time'; like any televisual form it is under pressure to fill every second, and it responds by sacrificing any orchestration of time for a series of short, sharp shocks. Hence most adverts contain shots of only two or three seconds' duration.

Compare this with the works of directors such as Jean-Jacques Beineix, frequently accused of only making adverts, despite the obvious fact that if this were true, they would be the first advertisements to last two hours. In fact just as television cannot master time, advertising is undone by time—after thirty seconds the advertising clip has nothing more to tell and is itself exhausted. The genius of a cinema director like Beineix is to show time undoing the work of advertising.

It has been said that the twentieth century is obsessed with time; which is, perhaps, hardly surprising given that time remains as multilayered and elusive to us at the end of this century as it did to Marcel Proust at the beginning. The cinema, that art of the twentieth century, remains the only form in which this mystery of time can be intimately explored as a collective visual experience. A symbolic rather than iconic medium, television will continue to document our times and will no doubt be the principal source of information for historians of the future. But only the cinema allows us to produce images of time itself, and of ourselves within time. It is only in the cinema that the human face can expand sufficiently to bend time around it, and then we become, like Proust's giants, plunged into years, touching epochs far apart, and occupying a place far greater than that allotted us by the simpler 'Newtonian' time-space frame of television's everyday chronicles.

... *thirtysomething*.

of history, can there be a justification for calling such dramas 'quality television'. And the elitism of that position, even if it is no stranger to BBC circles, since it so closely mirrors that organisation's own dramas, has no foreseeable future; and rightly so, in my view.

Nor can such work be called television drama, since just as documentary has been forced to adopt new forms, so, too, has drama. One sign of this is the dominance of the dramatic series over what used to be the one-off play. Through the process of what Bertolucci calls 'the mutual thefts and borrowings' which television and the cinema have engaged in over the past twenty years or so, 'straight' television drama is now competing directly with the cinema (and perhaps more immediately video), and has lost resoundingly. Unable to magnify the effects of time and movement, deprived of the affective dimensions of the big screen, the enveloping darkness of the movie theatre and the sense of time physically running out, all of which are today part of what constitutes filmic drama, the television play is thrown back to the theatre and the novel, forms where the verbal still dominates, but also stagnates. And once again the effect is that of a mutant form, neither theatre, nor cinema, nor novel. And for a great many, not television either.

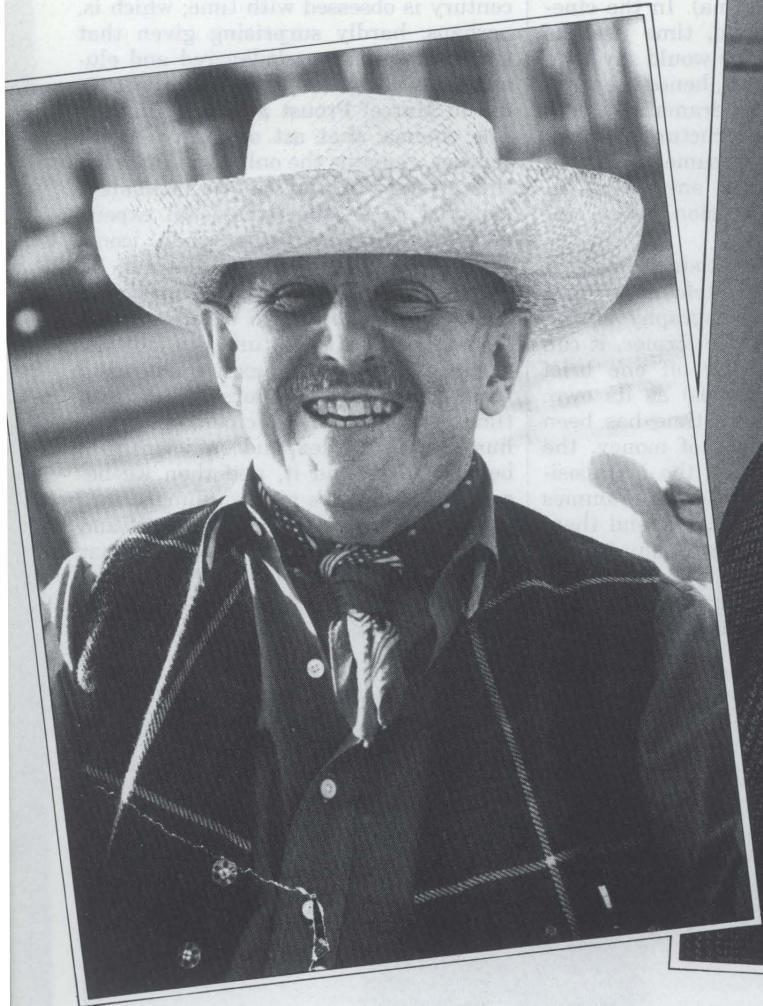
## OR IS IT CINEMA?

It is no surprise, perhaps, that in his brilliant attempt to encompass the cinema as a totality, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze devotes one volume to movement and another to time, the two 'wonders' of cinema, which television

La mode rétro: *Brideshead Revisited*.



# Cox's Orange Píppín



It used to be thought, in 1929, that sound was vulgar and had ruined the art of cinema. It was certainly thought, after the war, that colour was even more vulgar. Later, the widescreen was deemed to have ruined composition. This cultural snobbery was particularly at home in England, not least because all these innovations were transatlantic. And it was always Michael Powell's suspicion that part of the patronising disapproval that he attracted in his own country stemmed from his gusto for technical innovation and his refusal to smirk at Hollywood,

as the English cultural establishment did, even while chasing its money.

As for colour . . . 'Make the colour work for you, don't start working for the colour,' he cautioned himself on the eve of *The Thief of Baghdad*. In his autobiography there follows a characteristically forthright note. 'And when Natalie Kalmus' (the inevitable Technicolor 'consultant') 'was firing off her clichés at a grumbling Vincent Korda as she stalked about the big sets on the lot, I said to myself "We are not making coloured picture postcards for Technicolor".'

Not that he had anything but the highest regard for Technicolor as a process, as distinct from the unimaginative way it was exploited under the dragon eye of its guardian. This was demonstrated to me startlingly one sunny morning in Hollywood in 1981. We were making a BBC Arena Special on 'The Archers'—Powell and Pressburger—and had tracked Michael down to his modest Los Angeles apartment. He suggested it might be worth shooting him walking to work past the old Technicolor building.

He advised me to set up on the sidewalk opposite the entrance, but he

wouldn't tell me what he was going to do. On action he set chirpily off along the other pavement (humming the Sabu theme from *Thief*), but when he got to the steps of the old building, he suddenly stopped, turned towards the entrance, fell on his knees and, raising his arms above his head, embarked at the top of his voice on a litany of praise to his goddess, 'glorious, glorious Technicolor'.

I wanted, at that moment, the bad-tempered shade of Natalie Kalmus to burst through the swing doors, run down the steps and ask him what he thought he was up to. Instead, a natty grey silk suit with executive moustache and matching pocket-handkerchief emerged to interrupt us. 'Do you have permission to film my building?' barked the suit. His building? It had long since ceded its Technicolor identity of course and was now called something like Megavid tv Inc.

The suit began to demand that we talk contracts. Money and litigation were in the air. Michael hovered discreetly. I got on the highest horse I could find and started galloping off in all directions, flinging barbs about mercenary operators not fit to inherit etc etc and did the suit realise just who was this distinguished figure whose knees had lately been ennobling his crummy outfit's steps . . . And more in the same vein, or possibly vain; certainly snobbish, rather European and perhaps faintly anti-American. My only excuse, that I was incensed on Michael's behalf.

He was the one to find a solution. With easy charm he drew the suit away from the frothing Brit and had the matter settled in seconds: apologies were offered, no judgment made, no cultural fences erected, no shibboleths waved. We got on with the job and finished the shot.

Apart from being a useful little lesson in direction—which is 1 per cent art, 4 per cent logistics and 95 per cent diplomacy—the scene made me reflect on many of Michael's other qualities. Knowing when to be flamboyant and when to be retiring was part of it. But beyond the self-dramatisation (from which all decent Englishmen shrink), there was that unashamed expression of artistic passion—from which the English recoil in horror. Here was an elderly chap—otherwise perfectly decent, seen him in the club, never talks shop—going down on his knees in public, babbling about his Muse, getting all steamed up, and for what? For photography?

You can imagine Roger Livesey's old soldier in *Colonel Blimp* saying something of the sort. Yet Powell, confusingly, was both these creatures. Not a bit out of place in spanking town thorn-proofs when we filmed him later at his club, the Savile, relishing the tradition, revelling in its Englishness; but equally happy in black slacks, black shirt and straw fedora, singing his way merrily through Hollywood back-streets on his way to work at Zoetrope. And still, after 40 years, in love with a photographic process and its beauties, and with the



Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger outside the latter's cottage.

America whose energy invented it; and not ashamed to say so out loud, even on the steps of Megavid tv Inc.

Jack Cardiff wrote in the April FTT of his gratitude to Michael's daring: giving him his break on *A Matter of Life and Death*, we might now feel, wasn't so much daring as perceptive. But the true daring consisted in pushing the new boy into experiments here and later in *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes*. These films remain vivid as much for their photographic intensity as for anything else. It may be hard now to remember that for years 'muted' colour was opposed to 'garish' as unassailable definitions in critical usage, indicating sensitivity and its lack; that the terms very often carried an unspoken national ascription—British versus American; and that for many cultural commentators 'Technicolor' was simply a handy term of abuse for everything that was gaudy or coarse.

But it was the glorious intensity of the palette that Technicolor offered Powell which he relished, and that relish which his modern Hollywood admirers found endearing. Scorsese, a small dark rubber-ball, could hardly be held down in his chair long enough to express his bounding excitement at the thrilling memory of his first encounter with the Powell colour films of the 40s and 50s.

One of the great pleasures of our trip was taking Michael to visit the *King of Comedy* set in an empty garment block off 7th Avenue. The younger man's nervous glee at having the master in the wings, watching him work through twenty long takes with Jerry Lewis and De Niro; the old man's bubbling pride at being welcomed again into the commu-

nity of international movie-making by its best practitioners.

He proudly showed us, too, his office in the directors' block at Zoetrope, with its pigeon-holes in the lobby for colleagues' mail: Gene Kelly, Jean-Luc Godard . . . Coppola, uniquely, agreed to leave his beloved editing trailer for ten minutes to walk with Michael through the *One from the Heart* set. As we snaked our way into the arrival lounge of a pasteboard LA airport, I wondered if Coppola was thinking of the debt the movies owe to the man who built the shining Himalayas round a muddy puddle on the lot at Pinewood.

A bizarre conjunction, no doubt about it, this trim, upright, dapper, apple-cheeked 76-year-old Englishman and the wide-bodied, baggy-panted, black-bearded, shambling 42-year-old *enfant terrible* of the West Coast. Was it ever on the cards that Coppola, with Kelly, Godard or Powell, would really turn Zoetrope back into the good old bad old days, an empire and its emperor, with attendant princes? Whatever Coppola's private intentions, the gesture of bringing Powell into the fold was meant in warm homage, and warmly received.

For after all, Powell was an American fan. The man who might have been sipping sherry at the Savile bar was in some ways the essential, correct Englishman; but he was also the High Tory squire of *A Canterbury Tale* and the mystic Laird of Kiloran—and an honorary Yank. I loved and admired America and Americans. We loved their Constitution, their generosity and their success in creating a real democracy, owned by the people themselves.

I suppose it is this strong predilection and admiration for everything

American in the lively arts that makes the English critics and literary ladies and gents suspicious of me.' What Powell couldn't abide was a wishy-washy transnationalism. For all his American fervour, he never forgot that their Englishness was the heart of his best films. 'I never wanted to go to America and make their pictures for them. I wanted to make English ones. I was English to the core, as English as a Cox's Orange Pippin, as English as a Worcester Pearmain.'

What surely made English critics suspicious of him was not only his unseemly transatlantic verve, but his refusal to do the things normally expected of a Cox's Orange Pippin. No one would question his respect for Canterbury Cathedral and the Pilgrims' Way—after all, he was born there—but wasn't there something questionable about muddling ordinary British soldiers with all that medieval mumbo-jumbo?

*Went the Day Well?* shows you how to do that sort of thing properly (and chillingly good it is, too). But what's a respectable squire doing pouring glue in landgirls' hair? Not just questionable. Perhaps unpatriotic. Churchill clearly thought so when he tried to ban *Blimp*. He could see only one meaning—that the army was inflexible and out of touch, and that there was such a thing as a good German. He was immune to the deeper message that yesterday's heterodoxy is today's orthodoxy. Clive, says Powell, was a young bounder, but an old dodderer.

There were other strains in the Englishness that were unusual: a profound if gentlemanly erotic obsession. Clive is in love, gallantly, tragically,

with the same woman all his life, incarnated anew in each generation. When did *amour fou* fuel the hero of an Ealing film? Or how many other times in the British Cinema of Domestic Common Sense has a respectable businesswoman thrown over her well-heeled intended in the middle of a Scotch mist, and under the influence of Celtic myth? It is as though Celia Johnson were to forget the cocoa and slippers and, after all, cross to the other platform with Trevor Howard.

In all these wonderful confusions it would be wrong to forget the other magic ingredient: a quiet, modest, witty, quizzical Central European who was as passionate as Micky in his own way, but maintained a stiff Hungarian upper-lip about it. Emeric Pressburger was fervent about freedom and about Britain as a cradle of democracy and civilisation. He it was, instead of Michael, whom we found settled in a tiny thatched cottage in East Anglia with roses round the door and a little fishpond.

There he fed his fish and cultivated his garden and treasured his letters from the Royal Family and from the great and the good, and kept around him, on his crumbling plaster walls and pinned to the low beams, all the tokens of his adopted home, and the warmth and affection with which it had adopted him. 'I love England and Britain,' he told us, 'for to me, after I am chased across Europe by Hitler, it means sanctuary. It gave me a home.'

But Emeric's European-ness, too, gave flavour to their joint efforts, and brought surreal wit and irreverence as a sensible leaven when Michael's solemn mysticism threatened to teeter

on the daft. Together they had a vision of Britain at the end of the war which was unmistakably British, but deeply unjingoistic: not Ealing, not even the rebellious England of *Passport to Pimlico*, nor the anarchic Scotland of *Whisky Galore*; even less the doughty, conformist workers' paradise of Grier-son, with nary a hint of satanic mills or capitalist privilege.

In Michael's words, on the brink of *I Know Where I'm Going*: 'It was necessary to bring on to the screen a whole new world, full of people with their own standards and judgments, dependent upon one another, feudal, democratic and totally devoid of materialism.' It didn't do. It didn't do at all. And when The Archers went on to compound their felony, the felony of not being genuine Cox's Orange Pippins, Richard Win-nington spelt it out for them in his review of *A Matter of Life and Death*. 'It is even further away from the essential realism and the true business of the British movie than their two recent films *I Know Where I'm Going* and *A Canterbury Tale*'.

The true business of the British movie. I shall always remember those two old gentlemen sitting side by side on a bench at the bottom of the Savile Club's sweeping staircase and answering the charge of failing, over and over again, to attend to the true business of the British movie. 'Well,' twinkled Michael, looking around for wicked confirmation from Emeric, 'when have the English ever appreciated their great men?' 'I hope,' murmured Emeric, blinking at us from behind his horn-rims, 'you will not put this in your film.' But we did. ■

*A Matter of Life and Death:* Jack Cardiff, Michael Powell, David Niven and Alfred Junge on location at Saunton Sands.



# H E S F D R V E D

A SLIVER OF CINE-MARITIME HISTORY, RETRIEVED FROM THE  
OBLIVION OF A BUFF-COLOURED CIVIL SERVICE FILE, FINDS  
NOËL COWARD IN THE UNFAMILIAR ROLE OF FILMS ADVISER

TO THE NAVY.

In 1938, Captain (as he then was) Lord Louis Mountbatten decided that he had had enough of the slapdash arrangements by which films were screened aboard the ships of the Royal Navy. A great viewer, he had become increasingly fed up, on his own behalf and on that of ships' companies, with Entertainment Officers whose only cinematic offerings were silent one-reelers on peculiar gauges. He determined that 16mm equipment would be installed on all ships, and that an organisation (the Royal Naval Film Corporation) would be set up to lay on a supply of prints.

As an experienced operator within services both civil and senior, however, Mountbatten was well aware that even so slight an innovation as he was proposing stood no chance of being brought about until a committee had been formed and a certain minimum of paperwork generated—preferably to include a report to the committee, with a prestigious signature at the foot of it. Hence the following, a report by Noël Coward to the Chairman of the Admiralty Film Committee on a tour of the Mediterranean Fleet 'to discover the film tastes of the lower deck.'

It says much of Coward's friendship with Mountbatten that he was willing to be associated with this wonderfully barmy project, although no doubt the prospect of spending a couple of spring weeks padding around Port Said and Valetta harbours provided an added inducement. In any case, he came up with something evidently regarded as appropriate to the occasion—only in his para. g. does impatience crack the diplomatic deadpan. The RNFC was duly incorporated, with Mountbatten's usual split-second timing, in September 1939.

BOB BAKER

## COWARD'S REPORT

In the following report I shall try to state as concisely as possible the results of my visit to the Mediterranean Fleet in order to discover the film tastes of the lower deck. My procedure in each ship was more or less the same. To begin with, whenever possible, I had a talk with the Master at Arms, explaining to him the aims and objects of the RNFC. I then asked him, if it had not already been arranged, to pick from thirty to forty representative sailors for me to talk to. I also stipulated that I talked to the men without an officer present, as I suspected, I think rightly, that rank might frustrate conversation, as it so frequently does. On 9 April I joined HMS *Arethusa* as the guest of Rear Admiral Wells.

11 APRIL: PORT SAID                   HMS PENELOPE  
I talked to about thirty men in the forenoon. I began by explaining that the RNFC was planning to equip every ship in the fleet, excepting submarines, with a film projector and radio-gramophone. I explained that the ostensible object of this was instruction, and that later we hoped to use the equipment for the showing of exercises, etc, done possibly on the cartoon system. The radio was to

enable the daily news to be heard all over the ship, and the gramophone, which I understood from a point of view of additional cost was negligible, was to be donated as an extra by a kindly Admiralty.

I discovered that the sailors' principal grievance over the present system of rented films was that they only got pictures of two or three years old. Another grievance was the quality of 'shorts' which were shown in order to fill up the programmes. I explained that our new project would eliminate both these grievances: (a) because we had arranged with various film distributors to supply us with new pictures at cost price, and (b) that we intended to substitute for 'Lovely Lake Louise' and 'Fun and Fancy in Rhythm Land', etc, as many Disney and other cartoons as we could procure. This idea was very popular.

I explained to them also that they would be required to pay approximately three halfpence per head per week from the Canteen Funds, and that this was necessary because the large ships would obviously have to carry the smaller ones. They understood this perfectly, and seemed very pleased. Incidentally I should like to say here that I think what pleased them most was the realisation

that a serious effort was being made by the Admiralty to provide them with entertainment and distraction.

I then proceeded to question them as to their preferences for the various stars. Their reactions were clear and definite, and I think that now, after having visited eleven ships, I have a pretty shrewd idea of what they like. I will enlarge upon this at the end of my report.

16 APRIL: CYPRUS                   HMS ARETHUSA  
Talked to about thirty men with same results as *Penelope*.

23 APRIL: MALTA  
Arrived at Malta in *Arethusa*, and on invitation from the C. in C. went to stay at Admiralty House. I received a telegram from London regarding my theatrical charity, the Actors' Orphanage, which made it imperative for me to return almost immediately: whereupon I had a discussion with the C. in C. and the Captain of the Fleet wherein it was decided that I was to visit as many ships as possible during the two days that I was there. Both the Commander in Chief and the Captain of the Fleet were extremely sympathetic to the whole scheme, and every possible facility was given me.

24 APRIL: MALTA

Accompanied by Lieut Commander Trentham, I visited HMS *Malaya* in the forenoon. Admiral Binney, having been warned that I was coming, had everything arranged beforehand, and about forty men were waiting for me to talk to them. After I had talked to them I explained briefly the RNFC to the Admiral.

At six o'clock p. m. I visited HMS *Glorious*. In this ship there had, I think, been a slight misunderstanding as to my methods of procedure, because I discovered, on being led fore'ard, that instead of thirty men there were three hundred waiting, with every sign of vociferous enjoyment, to welcome me, which I must say they did wholeheartedly. This particular interview, although highly enjoyable, was a little less illuminating than the others because the task of extracting a concise and clear opinion of the various film stars from three hundred roaring sailors was fraught with difficulty. At the outset of the interview I asked for a cigarette, whereupon a voice from the back shouted: 'I knew there was a catch in it!' After this there wasn't a dull moment, and I am delighted to say that a good time was had by all.

At nine o'clock p. m. I visited HMS *Warspite* with Lady Pound and the Flag Lieutenant, and while a film of unparalleled dreariness was being shown on the quarter deck I interviewed about twenty-five to thirty sailors in the

recreation-room. This particular group was extremely intelligent, and I gathered all the information I wanted in a remarkably short space of time.

25 APRIL: MALTA

A schedule having been arranged by the Captain of the Fleet, I visited the following ships: HMS *Sussex*, *Shropshire*, *Protector* and *Aberdeen* in the forenoon. In the afternoon I visited HMS *Resource* and *Douglas*. Lieut Commander Trentham was extremely kind and came with me to each ship.

#### GENERAL SUMMARY

The most popular film stars, I think, are the following:

- a) 'Tough guys': i.e.  
Wallace Beery  
James Cagney  
Spencer Tracy  
Victor McLaglen  
Edward G. Robinson
- b) Charles Laughton in practically anything.
- c) Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers together  
William Powell and Myrna Loy together  
Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald together  
Gary Cooper  
George Arliss  
Ronald Colman  
Warner Oland  
Eddie Cantor  
Gordon Harker  
George Formby  
Will Hay

*In Which We Serve: Noël Coward and David Lean.*



Joe E. Brown  
Nelson Eddy

All these names are safe to buy for the fleet.

d) Women:

Gracie Fields

Claudette Colbert

Jessie Matthews

Dorothy Lamour

('jungle' sex appeal)

Mae West (in moderation, if such a thing is possible)

Eleanor Powell

Irene Dunne

Alice Faye

Bette Davis

Deanna Durbin

Simone Simon

(sex appeal French)

Jean Arthur

Joan Blondell

Sonia Henje

Loretta Young

All these rank high in popularity. Naturally rather dependent upon the film they appear in.

e) The five stars who are quite unmistakably *not* liked by the sailors are:

Greta Garbo

Marlene Dietrich

Robert Taylor

Douglas Fairbanks Jr

Dick Powell (who was ill-advised enough to do a picture called *The Singing Marine*)

f) Western films are extremely unpopular, but not as wholeheartedly detested as *Lieutenant Daring RN* and, in fact, any film dealing with the English Navy or the United States Navy. This, I think, is quite natural, as in the former they are quick to observe the manifold technical inaccuracies which so far have distinguished any English film dealing with the Services, and in the latter, that is films dealing with the United States Navy, I think they are oppressed by the obvious luxuriosness of the life depicted in that delightfully free-and-easy organisation.

g) My personal opinion regarding the choosing of films for the Fleet is that on the whole the sailors prefer good films to bad films, and that although, like the general public, their point of view cannot always be quite accurately predicted, in the general run swift-moving entertainment that is good of its sort can be safely recommended.

h) I would like to suggest that I should be permitted, in the immediate future, to visit shore establishments and certain ships of the Home Fleet, which would perhaps give me the opportunity of adding to this report.

i) I should like to say in conclusion that in every ship I have visited I was received with the utmost courtesy and kindness by everyone concerned.

May 9<sup>th</sup> 1932

**VARIETY'S**  
WHO'S WHO  
IN SHOW BUSINESS

THE  
MOTION PICTURE  
GUIDE

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A-Z

Jay Robert Nash  
Stanley Lainoff

**BANNED  
FILMS**  
MOVIES, CENSORS &  
THE FIRST AMENDMENT

**FEATURE  
FILMS**

EIGHTH EDITION

**VARIETY'S**  
DIRECTORY OF  
★ MAJOR  
U.S. ★  
SHOW BUSINESS  
AWARDS

- ★ Oscars 1927-1988
- ★ Emmys 1948-1988
- ★ Tonys 1947-1988
- ★ Grammys 1958-1988
- ★ Pulitzer Prize Plays 1917-1988

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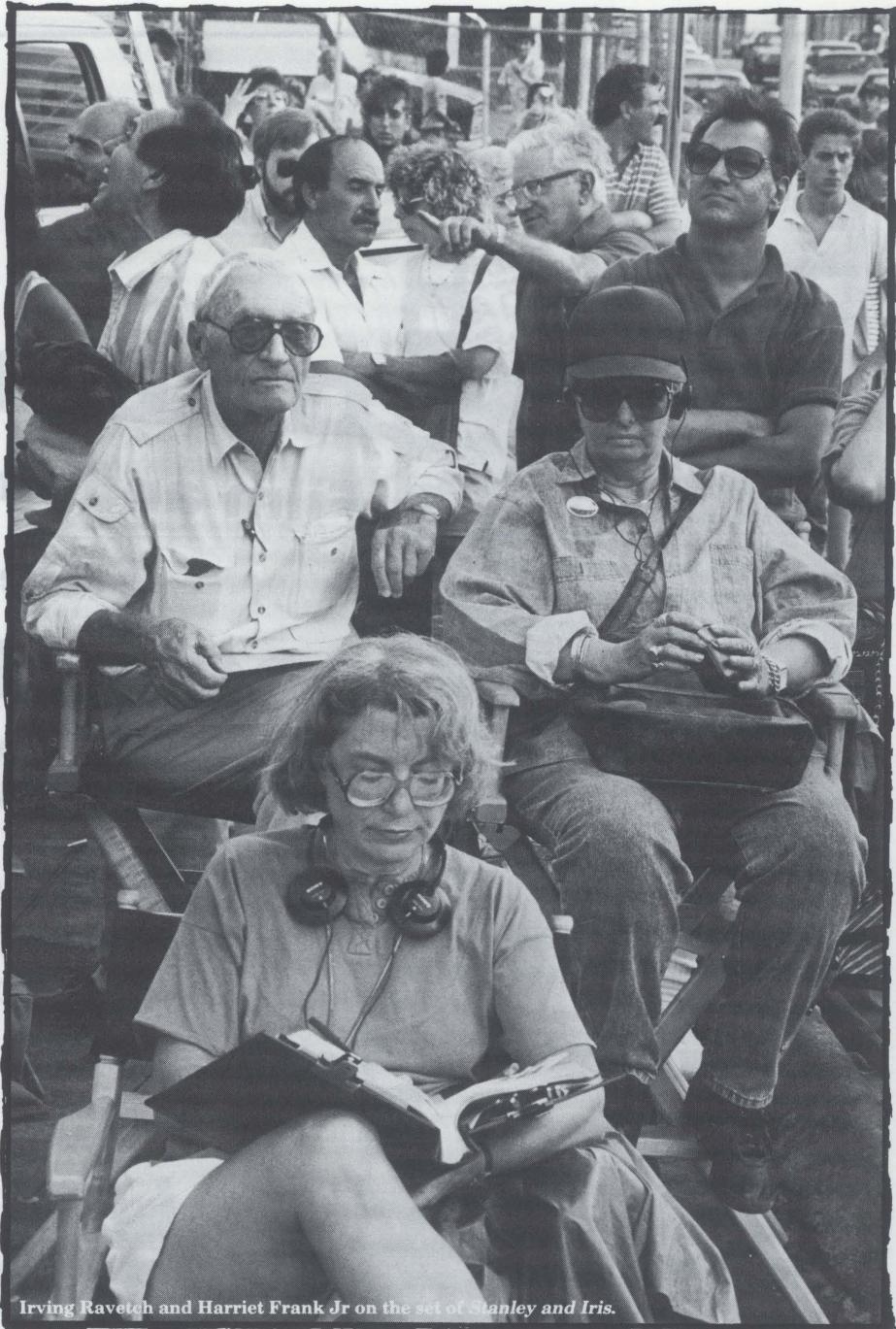
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SCREENWRITERS

STORY  
BY PAT MCGILLIGAN  
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY HARRIS



Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr on the set of *Stanley and Iris*.

No matter their record of accomplishment, the American (one is tempted to say distinctively American) screenwriters Harriet Frank Jr and Irving Ravetch maintain a stubborn privacy. They refuse interviews and dodge publicity; the studio is hard put to supply a photograph of them. They prefer to let their work speak for itself. And a formidable body of work it is.

They began separately in the mid-1940s as lower-echelon writers at MGM, later graduating to Westerns and melodramas. Partners since 1955, they have consistently tackled difficult, ambitious material: William Faulkner, William Inge, Larry McMurtry, Elmore Leonard. They have excoriated poverty, racism, labour conditions and human neglect. They have written, over thirty years, eight quality films in close collaboration with director Martin Ritt.

In 1989, the Hollywood branch of the Writers Guild gave them its highest accolade, the Laurel Award. A collec-

tion of three of their best scripts, *Three Screenplays: 'The Long Hot Summer', 'Hud' and 'Norma Rae'* (New American Library, 1988), has been published; in the United States, a benchmark of integrity usually reserved for the long deceased. Frank and Ravetch are, it should be added, the rare example of a Hollywood team who met and married while writing movies, stayed married and became 'very amiable' collaborators. After a long siege, they agreed to talk about their filmography, if only to boost the release of *Stanley and Iris*, their latest picture to be directed by Martin Ritt.

First, the names. Although Harriet is billed first, they are commonly referred to as 'the Ravetches'. He calls her 'Hank'. She is 'Jr', odd for a woman, but named after her mother, the other Harriet Frank who was a first-rate story editor at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

'She [the original Harriet] was a

Scheherazade,' Ravetch said. 'Louis B. Mayer and Eddie Mannix were rough types who did not sit down over the weekend to read *Crime and Punishment*. Her job was to read these immense novels and find the movie story in them, and then to tell an hour version to the whole board so that they could decide whether to buy the book and make the picture.'

'She was brilliant at it. I know for a fact that six months later a producer would call her, having got stuck on the third act of some script, and say, "Do you have your notes on the original story you told us?" She would review her notes, tell the story again and they would straighten the script out.'

Harriet's mother had been a short-story writer and radio host in Portland, Oregon. The Depression took her to California and MGM. After Harriet Jr graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), she was invited to join the MGM junior writers programme. 'Nepotism,' Harriet Frank admitted, 'pure and simple.'

Irving Ravetch was born in New Jersey. He suffered from asthma as a youth and doctors insisted he be raised out West. His father, a rabbi, chose California. 'I learned how to write because a poor rabbi mobilises his entire family to help. My job was to write bar mitzvah speeches for the young men when they reached thirteen. Each speech began, I'm afraid, the same way: "Today I am a man . . ."'

Ravetch also attended UCLA, though not at the same time. Asthma excused him from the Army and he became a proficient radio writer concocting 'patter' for Western singers. He had, however, other ambitions. 'I was hooked on the movies from the age of seven, from the time I saw *The Cisco Kid* with Warner Baxter. I knew I had to be in that world.' He secured a job as short-subject writer at MGM ('quite a good training, by the way') and worked on such items as the 'Crime Does Not Pay' series. He met his future wife in the studio corridor.

'You want the story? I saw this creature in an office up the hall about fifty yards. I knew a chap in the next office, so I proposed a deal, "I give you \$50, you give me your office." "Done and done," he said. So I paid for the office and courted her on L. B. Mayer's time.' 'Just like the movies,' interjected Frank. 'Meeting cute,' added Ravetch.

'At MGM they would just hand you scripts and say, "Do something with the dialogue" or "We're not satisfied with the storyline,"' Frank recalled. 'Since we were all underpaid and eager, we took whatever was handed to us. We worked on many scripts—sometimes with credit, sometimes without.' They learned by doing: the credo of that entire generation of studio-bred writers.

Almost imperceptibly they became senior writers, or at least considered themselves to be and demanded to be treated as such, accorded the minimum treatment and rates. They were fired—shortly after coming back from their



James Cagney in *Run for Cover*, the Ravetches' first joint credit.

honeymoon. At the same time, MGM announced that the junior writers programme was being scrapped as an economy measure. 'They were retrenching,' Ravetch noted. 'They do that periodically while they are building an extra swimming pool for themselves,' Frank said.

For a long time, Ravetch stayed at home and wrote original Westerns which he sold to Hollywood: *The Outriders* (Roy Rowland, 1950), *Lone Hand* (George Sherman, 1953). 'The Western landscape moved me, even as a child,' Ravetch said. 'Maybe it was the bitter grim Eastern winters as opposed to the sight of the glorious sunshine flooding the plains that I saw in the movies. For a long time I wrote only Western originals and had no interest in doing the screenplays.'

Frank, meantime, wrote upwards of a hundred short stories ('mostly comedy') for such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*. She moved on to Warner Bros where she composed 'masculinised dialogue for a fight picture with Dane Clark' (*Whiplash*, Lewis Seiler, 1948) and 'cowboy talk for Errol Flynn' (*Silver River*, Raoul Walsh, 1948).

For the first ten years of their marriage, they departed to different rooms in the house and did their agonising alone and separately. In the evenings there were two sets of writing problems. 'Affection and loneliness,' in Frank's words, led them to try working together. Their first shared credit is the offbeat Western *Run for Cover* (1955), directed by Nicholas Ray and starring James Cagney.

From then on their careers took a step up. They began specialising in adaptations, though from the start their inclination was to depart liberally from the original. Shining humanism became a hallmark. They tended towards rural or working-class stories, and frequently they explored the socio-political terrain

of the South and Southwest. 'The South is the landscape where the greatest evil was committed by America,' Ravetch said. 'It is also where there was a terrible war. It's full of memories. It's a dramatic place, soaked in blood. It led us to various pieces of material by Faulkner and others.'

All these tendencies are closely tied up with the Ravetches' relationship with Martin Ritt, the sometime actor and noted acting teacher, whose career as a film director began to take off at the time he met the Ravetches, in the late 1950s. 'Whatever strengths we had we combined,' Ravetch said.

It happened that Ravetch had a long-time hankering to write a Broadway play. During one abortive foray to New York City, a producer who had optioned his play gave him the choice of two directors. Ravetch chose the one whose name was not Martin Ritt. Afterwards, Ravetch felt he had to make it up—to himself, not to Ritt. Thus, when the Ravetches embarked on their first major feature for producer Jerry Wald at 20th Century-Fox, Ravetch recommended Ritt, who had already directed his first feature, *Edge of the City*.

In recent decades, the Ravetches have promoted the filming of William Faulkner's novels. They brought *The Hamlet* to Jerry Wald, 'who took a chance on us when nobody else would' (Frank's words). Wald bought the novel and functioned 'as a good producer' on their script. They also recommended *The Sound and the Fury* (Martin Ritt, 1959) to Wald; and later *The Reivers* (Mark Rydell, 1969) to producer Gordon Stulberg at Cinema Center.

The Ravetches performed major surgery on *The Hamlet*. 'I think maybe ten per cent of Faulkner is in that movie,' Ravetch said. 'The only really pure adaptation we ever did—except that we invented a second act—is *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (Delbert Mann, 1960).' Faulkner's *Flem Snopes*

(‘perhaps the most evil and vicious character in American literature’) was transformed into Ben Quick (‘a romantic hero’). Paul Newman, who played Quick, one of three roles written for him by the Ravetches, took the Cannes prize for Best Actor.

Although Fox imposed an ending, the Ravetches still list *The Long Hot Summer* as among their best and favourite films, along with *Hud* (Ritt, 1963), *The Reivers*, *Conrack* (Ritt, 1974) and *Norma Rae* (Ritt, 1979). They like to tell the story that when *The Long Hot Summer* was released, they prompted someone who knew Faulkner to ask his opinion of the film. ‘Faulkner said, and I quote, “I kind of liked it,”’ Ravetch said.

‘Having been a screenwriter himself,’ Frank said, ‘Faulkner was a tolerant man where other writers were concerned. He knew what labouring in the field was like. He was very good-natured about letting go of his work.’

The Ravetches claim to have led ‘a charmed life’ in Hollywood, at least since the mid-1950s. They have been blessed with producers—Pandro Berman, Sol Siegel, Jerry Wald and most recently Alan Ladd Jr—‘all of whom have a high regard for the word’. Their scripts have been filmed mostly intact; stars have, it seems, remained on their best behaviour—they changed maybe ‘four lines in three pictures’ at the behest of Paul Newman.

They are always on hand when Martin Ritt is shooting one of their scripts, still uncommon for Hollywood. ‘We have a tendency to come in at 120 pages and he shoots 100 pages and that’s a two-hour movie,’ Ravetch said. ‘His rhythm is perhaps slower. But we have not done a lot of rewriting for Marty.’

Their styles are complementary. The Ravetches avoid a pumped-up storyline;



*Hud*: Patricia Neal, Paul Newman.

Ritt’s camerawork is patient and leisurely. Their forte is characterisation; he is keenly attuned to actors and performance. Although Ritt is known for wearing his social conscience on his sleeve (*The Long Hot Summer* helped bring him off the Hollywood blacklist), the Ravetches actually originated some of the films for which the director is best known.

‘*Hud* dealt with the greed and materialism that was beginning to take over America, and which has fully done so today,’ Ravetch said. ‘*Conrack* and *Hombre* dealt with racism; *Norma Rae* with the exploitation of the union man, the fact that there is this tremendous industry which is not unionised. We found all that material and brought it to Marty; we share these social concerns.’

They are not, they emphasise, didac-

tic. And now in a film such as *Murphy’s Romance* (Ritt, 1985), a sleepy small-town love story with Sally Field and James Garner, they acknowledge, in Frank’s words, that they are in a more ‘September time of year, psychologically and emotionally’. ‘I think we are taxi-drivers,’ is how Ravetch puts it. ‘We go where the material leads. We find material that delights, interests or inspires us in some way.’

Their most recent inspiration came from a novel, *Union Street*, by an Englishwoman named Pat Barker. It was brought to them by the producers Arlene Sellers and Alex Winitsky. Although the book has a collective focus, one of the central characters, Iris, happens to have an illiterate husband. ‘The illiteracy was a small element in the very much larger canvas,’ Frank said.

Illiteracy, however, arouses their interest—the Ravetches have touched on it in other films. They developed a screenplay which focused on the romance between Iris and Stanley, a man she meets who can neither read nor write. Although Alan Ladd Jr, the producer of *Norma Rae* who was then at MGM, gave them a go-ahead, the commitment of Jane Fonda (Iris) and Robert De Niro (Stanley) was immensely important to the package. The story was filmed in late 1988 in Waterbury, Connecticut, and Toronto.

De Niro and Fonda give unshowy performances as ordinary people. There is also a fine bit part by the Russian-born Feodor Chaliapin Jr, whose career dates from the silent era. The acting carries *Stanley and Iris* even when the script itself seems to narrow and waver. A somewhat conventional ending, which the Ravetches regret, was imposed after audience previews. The film has its friends, including Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, but others have been less kind and there has been some disappointment at the domestic reaction.

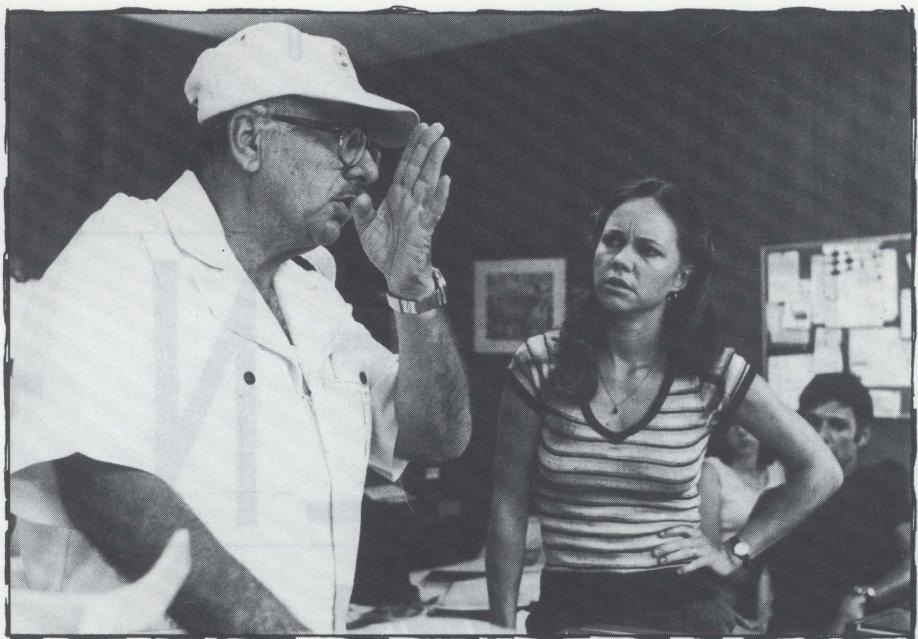
‘The things that went awry went awry,’ Frank said. ‘I still think it’s a good love story. The two people are attractive, they’re not beating each other up, they have some human concern for each other. Each character, in my opinion, has a certain kind of spirit. I’m not ashamed of the movie. I would do it again.’ ‘Amen,’ agreed Ravetch.

In the present Hollywood cycle of movies dominated by special effects and low comedy, *Stanley and Iris* is decidedly low-voltage. The shameless atmosphere of violence that pervades Hollywood movies outrages the Ravetches. ‘Europeans can make films which relate more healthily to the human condition,’ Ravetch said. ‘Of 50 films made in Hollywood each year, 35 are going to be blood and gore,’ Frank said. ‘The time has come, once in a while, whether audiences respond to it greatly or not, to propose a different standard.’

Ironically, among their own list of films, which are hardly noted for

*The Cowboys*: the screenwriters admit a ‘moral misstep’.





Martin Ritt directs Sally Field in *Norma Rae*.

excessive bloodletting, there is a famous exception: *The Cowboys*, in which the character played by John Wayne is killed, and the adolescent cowboys in his charge avenge his death. The scene divided reviewers and was a matter of dispute between the scriptwriters. The Ravetches freely regret the killing scene, a departure from the source material which they themselves concocted.

'We made a moral misstep because it should not have ended that way,' Frank said. 'It seemed to us that [the other way] it would be a Disney picture. At that point in our lives that was the worst opprobrium that could be levelled against us. The truth is, the kids could have captured the villains and brought them in for a trial. It was not necessary to have them going out with guns and killing.'

When they talk about their collaboration, the Ravetches use such terms as

'seamless' and 'even steven'. 'It's really a pure collaboration,' Ravetch said. 'We get together, talk out problems at exhaustive length, we do some kind of an outline together. Every word is thrown up into the air for approval, from one to the other. It's very hard to disentangle the process.'

They begin with an outline of 35 to 45 major scenes, which takes up one typewritten page. This has been arrived at after three to five weeks of mulling the story, long walks and car rides. The actual scriptwriting takes an average of ten weeks. They work from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., five days a week. They sometimes knock off one page a day. Two is the average, three a red-letter day. While working, they speak the dialogue back and forth. 'We're closet actors,' Frank admitted. 'I'm terrible, he's good.'

At the end of the day Frank will perform the day's output. 'We have had some trouble with our neighbours,' Ravetch said. In *The Dark at the Top of*

*Stanley and Iris*: Jane Fonda.



*the Stairs* the wife says (loudly) to the husband, 'I cannot argue with you about money all day and then want to go to bed with you at night! I have no desire to!' We had a rap on the door from the neighbours asking if they could send us a marriage counsellor.'

How do they know when an especially tricky scene is right? 'It's a click,' Ravetch said. 'I don't get any clicks,' Frank disagreed. 'You make the best and most judicious appraisal of the work you can and you're either right or wrong.'

In a way the Ravetches' tradition of scriptwriting ties into the thematic concerns of *Stanley and Iris*. They come from a bookish generation of Hollywood writers. Melville, Ibsen and Jane Austen come up in conversation. They prefer films that are more like novels, with a 'tapestry of life'. Back in the 1940s and 50s, foreign films meant a lot to them, French movies and the Italian neo-realists. Perhaps these films had no immense story thrust, but they teemed with people and incident.

Their best films are an amalgam of this European impulse, thoughtful human dramas infused with American elements of the Hollywood star tradition. 'Foreign movies seem to take time to pause and discuss some of the ambiguities of life,' Frank said, 'whereas American producers are always telling us—' Ravetch finished the sentence, '—keep your film moving.'

Six years elapsed between *Norma Rae* and *Murphy's Romance*, and another five before *Stanley and Iris*. An index of how difficult it is to push this kind of story in present-day Hollywood? Partly. There have also been scripts which have died along the way. The Ravetches spent a long time on an unlikely project, an adaptation of Piers Paul Read's *Alive*, about the cannibalism among the survivors of a plane crash in the Andes.

'We talked ourselves into the idea that we could handle that material,' Ravetch said. 'We spent months making hundreds of pages of notes, working out the cast of characters. It's an incredible story of the indomitability of the human spirit. It took us a long time to realise that nobody would walk into the theatre to watch it, and if somebody did wander in he'd turn around and run out when he saw people sucking the marrow from the bones of their loved ones. That one founded. It can happen two or three times in a row. An occupational hazard.'

Frank is thinking about starting her third novel. The first two, *Single* (1977) and *Special Effects* (1979), were both centred on women. 'I've never written any prose,' Ravetch said. 'I have no sense of the rhythm or the tone.' There is as yet no new script. 'We're finicky,' said Frank, speaking for them both. 'At this point in my life, I don't want to do anything I don't delight in. Either I want to feel passionate about it on a social level, or get an immense kick out of it.' Sooner or later, Ravetch added, they always get itchy. They find something. Or it finds them.

G E O F F R O W N

w h e n t h e

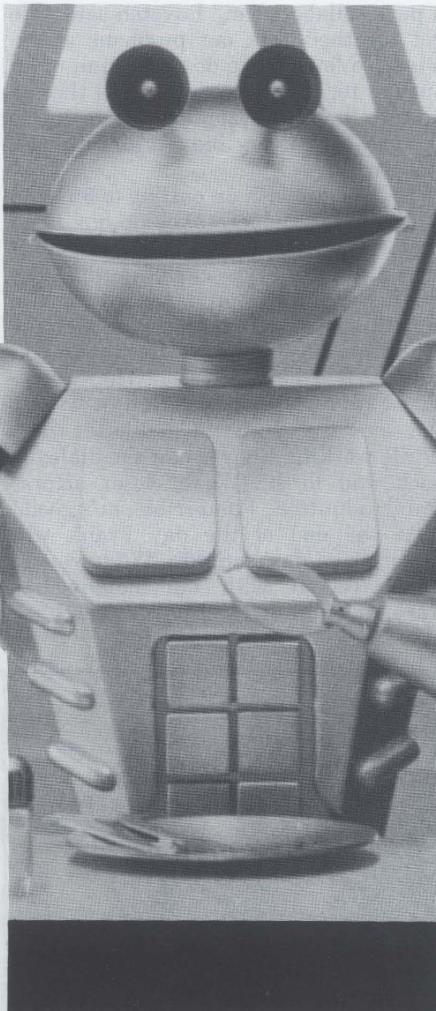
# • SALESMEN •

w a l k e d i n

On the evidence of *Washes Whiter*, Nicholas Barker's five-part BBC history of British television advertising, Britain in the days before TV bore a good deal of resemblance to the Garden of Eden before Eve bit that apple. True, advertisements existed: but in the home environment they generally sat still and quiet in the columns of newspapers and magazines. Whenever the radio set was tuned to Radio Luxembourg and other commercial stations, messages from motley sponsors—radio manufacturers, Ovaltine, Dolcis Shoes, even Syrup of Figs—wafted across the air. But only inside cinemas, far away from the hearth, did the advertisements woo the prospective customer with the full panoply of visual and aural enticements.

In Odeons and Granadas up and down the land, cigarette packets danced and sang; Arthur Askey's dentist taught him to avoid toothache by using Gibbs SR; boxes of chocolates in bilious colours were unveiled against velvet drapes. The advertisements came in a block, to be seen and forgotten; then, after a Palais Glide from the cinema curtains, up came the feature, uninterrupted.

Television advertising was rightly deemed to be different. Opponents of the proposed new broadcasting service—they were many and vocal—pointed a horrified finger at America, where advertisers' inanities spread like a miasma over all the programming. Visitors came back with frightening travellers' tales: a *Hamlet* production pockmarked with plugs for dentifrice; a transmission of *The Queen Is Crowned*, the Rank Organisation's documentary account of the Coronation, intercut with commercials featuring J. Fred Muggs, a popular chimpanzee. The widespread feeling of revulsion was summed up by



Smashed potato.

a letter-writer to *The Times*: 'We do not allow salesmen to walk at will into our homes nor to paste display advertisements upon our walls.'

The salesmen walked in, none the less, at 8.12 p.m. on 22 September 1955, during the first evening's transmission by the Independent Television Authority. At first only London and the Home

Counties received the intruders: by 1956, new transmitters in the North of England took the service to more than half the population. In the following years, the salesmen and their pastepots infiltrated Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; by 1962, they had visited 96 per cent of the population. Now, of course, the salesmen have long since taken up permanent residence; by rights, they should be paying the poll tax.

It was the former bandleader Jack Jackson, master of ceremonies on the festive night, who opened the door. 'Now, the moment you have all been waiting for,' he declared, tongue in cheek, once the televised banquet from London's Guildhall was over. The voice of the first salesman piped up, urgent, insistent: 'It's tingling fresh... It's fresh as ice!' The object in question was Gibbs SR toothpaste, a tube of which poked out from a block of ice in a studio mock-up of a stream banked with snow, a swirl of paste resting invitingly on a waiting brush. In place of Arthur Askey, a glamorous woman gave her gleaming enamel a vigorous rub-down. 'It's tingling fresh toothpaste,' the salesman swept on, 'that does your gums good too.' The camera homed in on the block of ice, then showed the tube nestling inside its carton; viewers had to take the gums on trust.

There was more. A spurious panel of four sat around in a studio set, trying to decide on their favourite beverage—Cadbury's drinking chocolate was the correct answer. A lump of margarine had its virtues extolled. Harry Corbett's glove puppet Sooty dropped an Oxo cube into hot water—and, hey presto! Mouth-watering gravy!

Then came Ruth Dunning, the homely actress known to viewers as Mrs Grove of the BBC's *Grove Family*. She

stood beside a floral-patterned chair, her head bowed, as though in prayer. 'Hello, I'm Ruth Dunning,' she confided pleasantly, the reverie over. She was proud, she said, to have been invited to take part in the opening transmission. 'It's a big night for all of us, and we do hope you're enjoying yourselves. Now, you'll be seeing quite a bit of me in the future, in some of the television advertisements for Persil.' She then made way for the Persil children—an animated pair, one of whom emerged from a spin inside a soap bubble with a white dress as dazzling as black-and-white television in the 50s allowed.

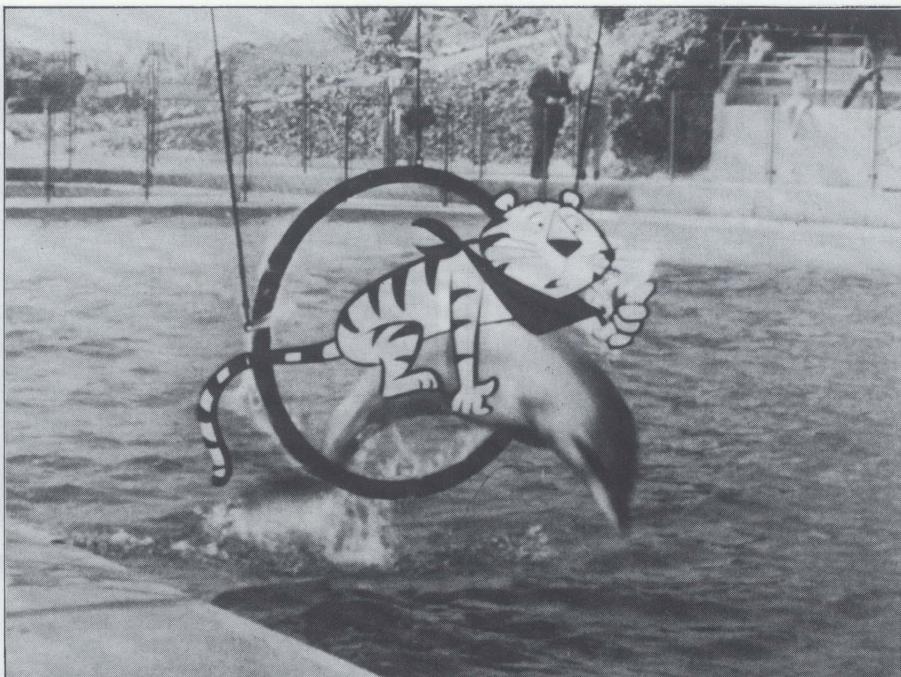
Critics, on the whole, were mollified by the innocuousness of the evening's advertising fare. The *News Chronicle* compared the commercials' muffled impact to that of well-mannered tradesmen making their entrance at the side door. Who, indeed, could object to the divine Sooty, or Ruth Dunning's teacosy charms? True, the accompanying jingles were mostly childish—some observers found the voices harsh, the words hard to understand—but they had the momentary appeal of amusing novelties.

Some of the features of early television commercials—the use of repetitive phrases and slogans, the comparatively low estimation of the audience's IQ—derived from American practice. But in other respects, the advertising agencies simply looked backwards to the habits of British sponsored film-making during the Second World War. Put some authority figure behind a desk or dress him in a white suit and clipboard, the theory went. Give him an expository speech to deliver stiffly, full of facts, figures and the joys of civic virtue; wrap up the message with a visible slogan flung on to the screen in capital letters.

The Home Front had simply changed to the Kitchen Front: the enemy were no longer Fifth Columnist snappers, Squander Bugs or other Nazi minions, but germs, dull teeth or the obstinate stain on Johnny's pullover. The brand product was the only possible weapon that could win the country's postwar battles and keep the home of the 50s healthy, safe and strong.

As the cascade of clips in *Washes Whiter* showed, the experts were often deliciously bogus: a bad actor with pipe and specs; the television announcer and compère McDonald Hobley, behind a desk with a sign declaring 'Alka-Seltzer Announcer'; a scientist and assistant watching a needle on a scale, laboriously measuring the tenderness quotient in each consignment of Birds Eye peas fetched in from the field. Yet these men of straw served a purpose at the time: in the brave new world of British television advertising, consumers needed reassurance that they were not being peddled some carnival barker's patent medicine. You could trust McDonald Hobley; he used to announce for the BBC.

You could also trust John Betjeman;



The Frosties' Tiger.

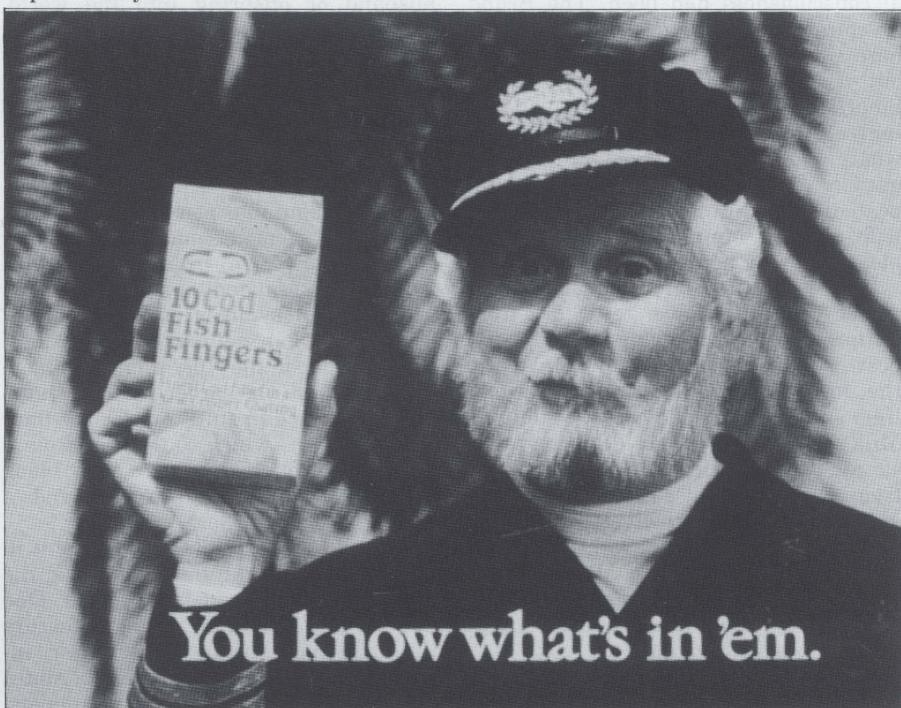
though what precisely was he selling? In Shell's series 'Discovering Britain', he roamed round the country's quainter, leafier corners, murmuring words of delight at the landscape. No petrol station ever loomed into view; in one *Washes Whiter* clip, Betjeman even exhorted prospective day-trippers to 'get out of your motor-car and walk': it was the only proper way, he said, to look at a village. The advertising strategy here harked back beyond the war to the benevolent philosophy of the GPO, London Transport and other concerns (Shell included), financing films, posters and other offshoots where the sponsor's products or services were often tangential, if not irrelevant.

Given the advertisers' impatience for concrete results and ascending sales figures, the innocent manner of these

early commercials could not last. As the ITA's broadcasts spread to more and more homes, the polite, tip-toeing salesmen grew emboldened. They developed fangs and loud voices and took tenacious hold of the viewers' jugulars during the 'natural breaks' that, miraculously, seemed to occur every fifteen minutes during every programme.

No longer, for instance, could the Persil children innocently frolic with their soap bubbles. As the 50s drew to a close, they joined the shock troops in a furious battle for the housewife's allegiances. On one side was Proctor and Gamble, whose products included Daz, Dreft, Fairy Snow and Tide. On the other, Lever Brothers marshalled the forces of Persil, Omo, Radiant and Surf. Daz pronounced its complete superiority to all rivals, particularly Brand X;

Cap'n Birds Eye.





The Brooke Bond chimps and the Hovis delivery boy.

while Omo's salesmen declared that it 'improves even on perfect whiteness'. So heated was the crossfire that in 1961 the IBA had to step in to curtail the rhetoric. Comparative claims between rival detergents could be allowed no more, for they were cutting right across the famous commitment to 'legal, clean, honest and truthful advertising' adumbrated in 1955 before the new service was launched.

Watching clips of the thousand or so advertisements juggled with awesome agility into the five programmes of *Washes Whiter*, one realised afresh how great their penetration into the national consciousness had been. The Brand X epics were strangely missing. But here was the silly girl popping in and out of camera range at the end of the Smartie commercial, singing, maddeningly, 'Buy some for Lulu'; here was the wistful boy following his mum to the garden gate, licking his lips and repeatedly muttering, 'Don't forget the fruit gums, mum' ('He should say please,' my mother always observed).

Here were the legion of hoodwinked people who could never tell Stork from butter; the poor saps who had to have a best friend whisper 'B.O.' in their ears; the James Bond clone risking life and limb supplying his lady with Cadbury's Milk Tray. Molly Weir demonstrating canny Scots intuition by cleaning her floors with Flash; disc jockey Alan Freeman charming housewives with Omo, the wonder detergent, and its 'new fabric brightener, W.N.'; Murraymints, Murraymints, the too-good-to-hurry mints: they were all there somewhere in Barker's intricate mosaic.

Barker and his team maintained a largely sociological approach to this

mountain of images. There was nothing fanciful in this: advertising campaigns are conceived in the first place for specific audiences within Britain's constantly changing social strata. The series' array of talking heads—drawn from advertising executives down the decades—were always on hand to bang home the point. 'Ads are archaeology,' said Barry Day, vice-chairman of Lintas Worldwide. 'You look back, and that's the mirror to the way you lived.' 'The barometer of an age,' pronounced David Putnam, who first ventured into the field as a messenger boy for Service Advertising in 1957.

Throughout the series, women provided the most volatile barometer readings. From the beginning, she was firmly established as the good wife, tied to her own apron strings, sending her husband or offspring into the world, happy in the knowledge that their shirts were blazing white and their stomachs full of energy-giving nourishment. Gradually she turned into the working mum, keeping her job and her family on the rails with the help of tasty, time-saving convenience foods. For a disreputable period in the early 1970s, she seemed something left over from a *Carry On* frolic: heavy with bosoms and innuendo, pandering to the worst sexual symbols and stereotypes, especially when selling dairy produce. By the end of the 70s, another image had appeared: the career woman, short-haired, dressed in suits, out for the finer things in life—which could vary from a building society account or a sleek black car to a fast-acting shampoo and a bouquet from Interflora.

At times the barometer could point in several directions at once, following the confused flux of society at large. One advertising spot in 1971 might feature the devil reclining in an armchair, introducing the latest in his line of sinful pleasures—Cadbury's Angel Trumpets.

The next spot might offer a hymn to Nimble bread—slices of air wrapped in plastic, each slice containing forty calories, vital ammunition for winning another of the ad-men's key peacetime conflicts: the 'inch war'.

The series' most piquant examples of barometric change, however, concerned individual brands—twisting and turning to reposition their image, humbling themselves before the *zeitgeist*. In the famous Oxo series 'Life with Katie' (1958–1976), featuring Mary Holland, this was subtly achieved by varying the nature of husband Philip's occupation and their household's social ambience. When their executive lifestyle drifted too far above the target audience's heads, Philip abandoned the boardroom and the evenings at the ballet for the delights of being a man among men, tramping round building sites in a hard-hat.

Other campaigns played the image game far more crudely. In the swinging 60s, boring bread tried to appear fashionable and exciting. '1966,' the voice-over shrieked, 'and ain't life Wonderloaf! A modern bread for a modern world . . .' The Rolling Stones were even recruited to perform the jingle for Rice Krispies, a veteran brand in need of a kick in the pants. The late 80s campaign for Lucozade—black men rippling with physical strength and endurance, thanks to their trusty glass bottles of liquid glucose—were omitted from Barker's line-up; but there were a few nostalgic glimpses of the Lucozade of the 50s, marketed as the drink that 'aids recovery', the perfect pick-me-up after a bout of illness, or even thirty minutes at the ironing board.

Nothing was wrong with the sociological approach. Yet as the machine-gun splatter of clips and analysis continued, the viewer might have been thankful for an occasional change of scene.



Oxo's Katie and the never-alone Strand man.

Considering the wealth of name directors earning their crust in advertising, and the significant rise to big-screen fame of commercials-trained talent like Alan Parker, Ridley Scott and Hugh Hudson, there could have been plenty of scope for playing Spot the Auteur if the series had been angled a different way.

Ridley Scott's seminal 1974 Hovis advert—the bike pushed up a cobbled street to the warm accompaniment of a brass band—duly appeared as a sign of the decade's move towards comforting, cosy nostalgia, but the director was left unidentified. There were snippets from Alan Parker's Birds Eye beefburger cycle; it would also be tempting to assign a frenzied 1968 spot for Wall's Funny Faces, featuring children dressed as gangsters cavorting in a field, to the future director of *Bugsy Malone*.

Elsewhere, who knows, we could have been seeing the handiwork of Karel Reisz (who in his time has sung the praises of Persil, Mars Bars, Lux, Horlicks and Campari), Ken Russell (Black Magic), John Schlesinger (Stork, Kellogg's, Eno's, Polo mints), Clive Donner (Nimble bread, Cadbury's Black Magic), Kevin Billington, Wolf Rilla, Cy Enfield, Richard Lester, Jack Gold, Joseph Losey (Eno's, Ryvita, Rose's Lime Juice, Horlicks) and Lindsay Anderson, whose topics have ranged from Kellogg's, Findus fish fingers and Guinness to Iron Jelloids and Ewbank carpet sweepers. Schlesinger once estimated that every significant British film director from the late 50s onwards had worked in commercials, with the grand exception of David Lean.

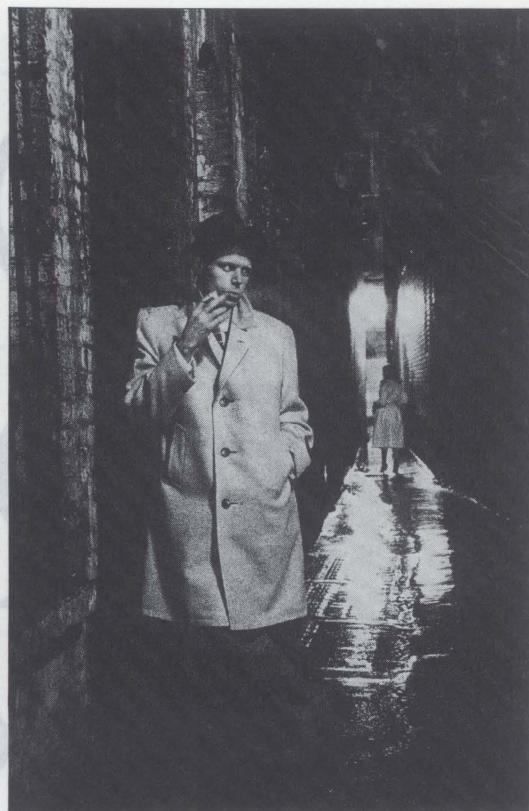
It is hard, indeed, to imagine a David Lean commercial: the genre is not conducive to epic sweep and rigorously classical editing. With the younger directors who learned their trade in advertising, however, one can detect their starting-point in many aspects of their big-screen work. Parker, Hudson,

Ridley and Tony Scott, Adrian Lyne and others were all trained to sell their chosen brands by surface tricks, wrapped up in high-gloss visuals, packed into thirty or so high-budget seconds. They were trained to conjure up atmosphere, not relay facts and figures, let alone construct long-term narratives. Their brief in advertising was to focus audience attention on the product's aura—the cachet it bestowed—not the nuts and bolts of its function, ingredients or price.

That, as David Puttnam pointed out in programme five, was the preserve of old-fashioned, primitive advertising. In the early days, once the British hesitations over the vulgarity of selling were tucked out of the way, you thrust the product up on the screen; you told the viewer what it did, how much it cost, and where it might be purchased.

Puttnam identified the change-over period as 1962/3; though the trailblazing campaign was Strand's famous series of cigarette adverts in 1960, featuring Terence Brook as the 'lonely man', standing in the street at night, his raincoat collar turned up while London's bright lights flickered starkly behind him: the man who was 'never alone with a Strand'. The industry admired the campaign for its fresh approach. The adverts also amused the public, though they did little to boost actual sales. Who wanted to buy the cigarettes of a man who had no friend—not even someone who could whisper 'B.O.' in his ear?

Later campaigns learned the lesson: if other cigarette smokers were depicted alone, agencies made sure they were virile action-man types, breathing in the toxic fumes that were—for selling purposes only—'cool as a mountain stream'. From being confined to the studio's mock-up kitchen or dining room, advertising film crews increasingly spread their wings in the 60s,



conjuring up the products' chosen aura with the help of sand dunes, seashores, rugged mountains, heavenly blue swimming pools, horses, fast cars, helicopters and other accoutrements of escapist fantasies.

The precise visual consequences of this change from direct to indirect advertising, however, were never followed through in the series. Images, indeed, received little treatment as such. A montage in the first programme assembled a row of 50s mothers, locked in their domestic prisons, looking with pride and a wisp of wistfulness at their chief contribution to the world outside—clean, well-fed husbands and children. The early 70s' use of camera sun glare as a visual euphemism for female pleasures was drawn to our attention, along with the businessman's habit during the 80s of working in offices with gigantic windows. But it must be left to other programmes to explore the commercial makers' skilful manipulation of the viewers' impulses through a daunting repertoire of symbols and visual sleights of hand.

Other programmes, too, might venture a more critical look at the entire business—at the spectacle of Britain's film talent exerting massive ingenuity, style, wit and money, not on the potential big screen masterpieces of the future, but on snippets of celluloid persuading people to buy dog food. *Washes Whiter*—prepared with the hard-fought co-operation of the advertising agencies themselves—was not in a position to go out on this particular limb. But the series performed a herculean and crucial task in clearing the way for all future explorers of the world post-1955: the world after the salesmen walked in.

# SHADOWS OF EARLY FILMS

The publication of Kemp R. Niver's *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912* was likened by Raymond Fielding to a boiling over of 'the great Sargasso Sea of scholarship'. Certainly, the renovation and recopying of more than three thousand American and, to a lesser extent, European films deposited with the Library of Congress as a copyright safeguard has done much to alter our perception of the early cinema. But the fortuitous survival of such a wealth of primary material is not unique. There exists a smaller though in many ways comparable source for the study of the formative years of British film which has yet to be fully exploited.

Many films which have long since perished enjoy a precarious afterlife in the form of Mutoscope reels or flicker-books, printed on to paper from the original negatives and then used in 'What the Butler Saw' machines or home viewers such as the Kinora. Although these fragile, sometimes dog-eared sequences of photographs represent only sections of the films from which they were taken, they provide a wonderfully varied view of Victorian and Edwardian cinema in action.

Great actors and music-hall stars from a golden age of theatre, comedy episodes whose brief plots embody the humour of the nineteenth century's illustrated press and actualities showing the everyday life of almost a hundred years ago are preserved and are available for recopying. With patience and some financial backing, it should be relatively straightforward to compile a provisional catalogue of existing items, to make a number of identifications, and as with the Library of Congress Collection, to transfer items to film for research and documentary purposes.

The flicker-book principle, as exemplified by Linnet's Kineograph of 1868, predated the earliest films by many years. During the infancy of the cinema, the Mutoscope or 'What the Butler Saw' machine, developed by Herman Casler

and William Kennedy Laurie Dickson as a commercial rival to Edison's Kinetoscope film viewer, was soon combined with a long-standing tradition of fair-ground peepshows to become a modest and in some ways less respectable alternative to the projected image. Introduced to Britain early in 1898, the Mutoscope quickly caught on. Its ornate cast-iron viewers became standard fitments at railway stations, seaside piers, amusement arcades and even in gentlemen's lavatories.

The Mutoscope's nickname was not unjustified. In 1898 the *Hove Echo* referred to 'very interesting and spicy pictures' and in April 1899 an MP wrote to *The Times* complaining that 'viciously suggestive pictures' were being exhibited in a Southport arcade. The public's tastes were not, however, completely degenerate. Other non-keyhole views included primitive comedies, newsreels and snippets of theatrical interest. At about the time of the rise of the Mutoscope, the English inventor and pioneer cameraman Harry C. Short had developed a mechanically operated flickerbook called the Filoscope (patented in November 1898) which displayed some two hundred half-tone photographs taken from films made by his colleague Robert W. Paul.

In *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England*, John Barnes has drawn attention to the value of the Filoscope in preserving some of the earliest films. We are fortunate, for instance, that No 11 in the series has survived, a Filoscope whose 176 numbered photographs were taken from one of the first narrative films, *The Soldier's Courtship* (made on the roof of the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties, Leicester Square, in April 1896). Paul's Theatrogram was exhibited regularly as part of the entertainment at the Alhambra from 25 March 1896 and he often drew on the theatre's performers and stage properties for his films. An introductory leaf announces that the actors in *The Soldier's Courtship* were 'Mr Fred Storey



Mutoscope.

and Miss Julie Seale both familiar figures in the well known Alhambra Ballets.' Other surviving Filoscopes depict a few seconds of clowning from the great blackface comedian G. H. Chirgwin; a graceful dance by the postcard beauties May and Flora Hengler; and the coster singer Alec Hurley, second husband of Marie Lloyd, drinking a glass of stout.

George Chirgwin (1854-1922), introduced on the Filoscope as 'The White Eyed Kaffir', was one of Victorian England's most distinctive music-hall and pantomime performers. His extravagantly tall top hat perched at a perilous angle and his bizarre make-up would have made him instantly recognisable to the majority of viewers; and Paul's film, taken in June 1896, was among the first to capitalise on a subject's star status. Although Filoscopes and other photographic flicker-books, known as pocket cinematographs, run for a tantalisingly brief time, they are often the only existing record of the original film. Those showing Chirgwin, Hurley and the Sisters Hengler are the only known motion pictures of the performers to survive.

The Mutoscope was a far more durable and prolific device and has left an extensive legacy of potential film footage. To produce photographs clear enough for peepshow exhibition, the Mutograph camera used the very large picture size of 70 by 55mm, an innovation which also resulted in high-quality projected images when the Biograph was introduced in September 1896. (Although the Mutoscope had already been developed, the first demonstration of Edison's Vitascope on 23 April 1896 caused the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company to devise and launch its own projector before the viewer had been commercially unveiled.)

Because of the idiosyncratic nature of

its camera, the American company and its British subsidiary trained their own cameramen and produced all their own films, providing surprisingly wide coverage of the Spanish-American War (1898), the Boer War (1899-1900) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900), as well as newsreel shots of such events as Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897) and the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina of Holland (1898). Among assorted celebrities to feature in 'animated portraits' were Pope Leo XIII; Charles Morton, the founding father of the British music hall; and the grand old man of Chinese politics Li Hung Chang, filmed viewing himself on a parlour Mutoscope.

From its inception, the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company filmed stage performers and scenes from current theatrical productions for exhibition in both its outlets. In the summer of 1898, Roma T. Roma and Frank Wood appeared in an extract from their music-hall sketch *He and She*. The musical comedy favourite Ben Nathan portrayed a beneficiary reading the news of a rich aunt's death in a 'facial expressions' item, *The Fateful Letter* (1898); while in the same year the fencing contest from Lewis Waller's *The Three Musketeers* was produced as both a Biograph film and a Mutoscope reel.

The company achieved a scoop in 1899 when the leading actor-manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree was persuaded to appear in a scene from Shakespeare's *King John*, then playing to packed houses at the newly built Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket. Subsequent theatrical items to be filmed included a scene from the Daly's Theatre production of the long-running musical comedy *San Toy* (1900), featuring Marie Tempest, Hayden Coffin, Huntley Wright and the original Savoyard Rutland Barrington; and an extract from *English Nell* (also 1900) then playing at the Prince of

Wales Theatre with Marie Tempest as Nell Gwynne, and the 25-year-old H. B. Warner (later to become one of Hollywood's most enduring actors) as the Duke of Monmouth.

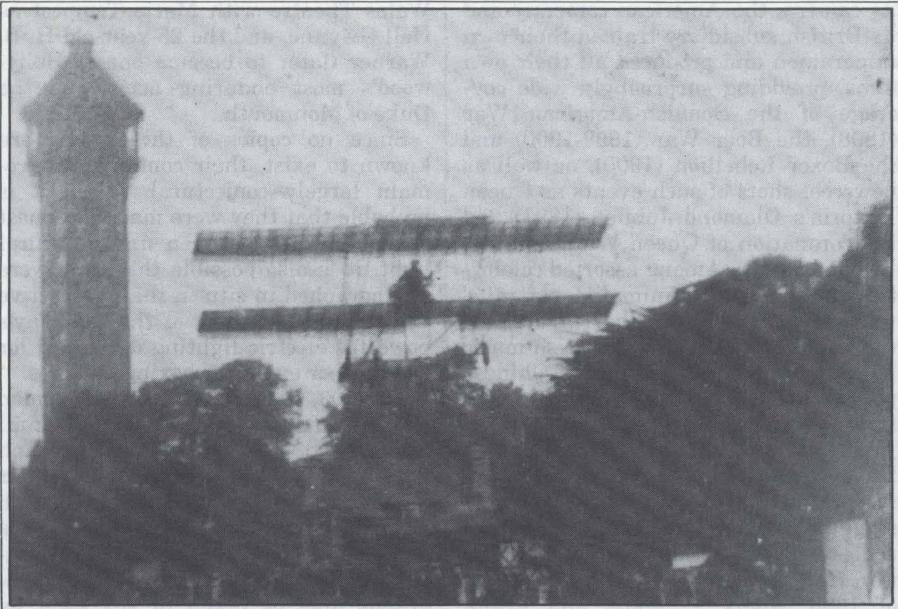
Since no copies of these films are known to exist, their content must remain largely conjectural. While it is probable that they were made like most early films in the open under natural light, it is also possible that they were photographed in situ in their respective theatres, making use of the company's powerful electric lighting developed for such indoor events as boxing matches.

By 1900, the company, whose London offices were at 18-19 Great Windmill Street, had also opened the Biograph Studio at 107 Regent Street, later advertising that it was 'equipped with an installation of electric light which is unparalleled in the history of photography, and by the aid of which photographs may be taken in any light by day or night.' Although conventional films were made at the Biograph Studio, a major part of its output was material produced for the Mutoscope and the Kinora.

The Kinora, intended for home use, was available as a hand-cranked device similar in appearance to the table stereoscope so beloved of Victorian families, or as a more elaborate model with a clockwork motor, ornate pedestal and three thick magnifying lenses for group viewings. The reels of about six hundred 25 by 20mm photographs were often extracts from films shown at the Biograph's music-hall outlets, although about half the original forty frames a second seem to have been omitted (occasionally a slight discrepancy in the phase mounting of the pictures can be detected). It is possible that films issued by the Warwick Trading Company were also reproduced, since the Kinora was marketed jointly by both companies.

Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell Edit the Sun (1902).





Take-off from Crystal Palace, about 1910, recorded on a Kinora reel.

A series of advertisements published in the *Playgoer* magazine (December 1902 to June 1903), and in the *Illustrated London News*, indicate that the Biograph Studio was targeting the Kinora at a relatively sophisticated middle-class public, although production of the saucy Mutoscope reels continued unabashed. Initially, the American musical comedy star Edna May ('The Belle of New York') was depicted examining a Kinora and, presumably, viewing herself. The accompanying slogan: 'Ourselves as others see us.' Full particulars of 'the latest and greatest achievement in animated photography' and a catalogue were available.

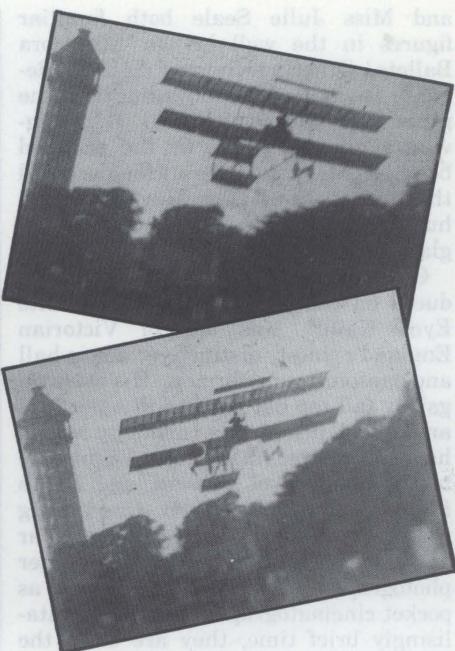
Later advertisements announced, 'Wireless Telegraphy to be seen in the Home Circle,' clarifying the somewhat enigmatic claim with a picture of the radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi 'viewing himself despatching wireless telegraphic messages'. Among 'thousands of topical animated views' said to be available, a number of reels featured scenes taken at the Delhi Durbar of January 1903. Illustrated by a smiling European woman bedecked in vaguely Oriental finery, the copy ran: 'One nobleman expended over £3,000 in visiting India to see this, the greatest of Oriental spectacles. All that remains to him is the recollection of what occurred. The KINORA, however, will reproduce for you as often as desired, this historical and glittering pageant, enabling a study at leisure of every detail.'

In June 1903, the Biograph Studio offered an enterprising additional service: 'animated portraits of your own family' at two guineas a reel. Repeat orders were priced at 15/-, and operators were on hand to 'attend at the houses of clients to take these photographs.' A rather grand home visit was that made to Marlborough House in 1900, when Biograph cameramen spent two mornings filming the three young children of the Duke of York, later King George V. A series of stills published in the

*Harmsworth Magazine* shows the films to have been extremely patriotic—the Boer War was at its height—with the sailor-suited Yorks parading and saluting the Union Jack. The almost compulsory scene of the children viewing themselves on a Mutoscope was also taken. By 1911, a Kinora home-movie camera was being marketed for £19, with reels for paper negatives costing 1/6d and mounted reels as little as 3/6d each.

Among the many Kinora reels showing nameless children and pets, views of anonymous 'phantom' railway rides, zoo scenes and the like, some subjects can be positively identified. John Barnes points out that the early American Biograph film *Shooting the Chute* is preserved on such a reel, while the trials of the motor torpedo boat HMS *Viper*, during which the cameraman's boat was almost capsized, can be recognised from a frame still published as a magazine illustration in 1901. The identification of even well-known personalities can be remarkably difficult; there is, however, no mistaking the Scottish comedian Sir Harry Lauder and the famous magician David Devant. The failure to locate a Kinora catalogue, coupled with the extremely poor documentation of British Biograph films, means not only that sections of lost films will reappear, but that previously unrecorded items will be discovered.

Paper-print versions of films featuring eminent Victorian and Edwardian actors and music-hall performers may still remain to be recognised in private and public collections. David Mayer of the Drama Department at Manchester University has written of the value of early films in providing direct insight into theatrical techniques and stage effects. He rightly concludes that film historians such as Kemp R. Niver have understandably concentrated on the technical aspects of the films, while theatre historians remain largely unaware of the 'astonishing range' of material available on film.



With the exception of such established film personalities as D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and Florence Lawrence, most performers appearing in Paper Print Collection films are unidentifiable. Two names of great interest to theatre historians, however, are Vesta Victoria (1874-1951) and Joseph Jefferson (1829-1905).

*Waiting at the Church* and *Poor John* (both copyrighted by Belcher and Waterson on 1 February 1907) were two of Vesta Victoria's most popular music-hall songs. Her mimed performance, clearly intended to synchronise with a gramophone recording to form a primitive sound film, presents a possibly unique opportunity to study the technique of a major Edwardian variety star captured at the height of her career, rather than filmed in what Colin MacInnes described as 'splendid decrepitude' many years later.

Jefferson, one of the greatest and best-loved American actors, appears in *Rip*, an eight-scene version of Dion Boucicault's *Rip Van Winkle* (copyrighted by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company on 9 December 1902, but almost certainly made in 1896). Though short, the film constitutes a striking link with the mid-Victorian theatre, since Jefferson had caused a sensation when he first played the role in London as early as 1865.

A figure of similar importance recorded on paper prints was the outstanding star of music hall and pantomime, Dan Leno (1860-1904). Although Leno never deserted the egalitarian world of the music hall in which his earliest successes had been achieved, his national fame derived as much from sixteen consecutive appearances (1888-1904) in the opulent pantomimes mounted by the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. In the same way that the Theatre Royal's unimpeachable reputation granted middle-class audiences an annual indulgence to witness low comedians and scantily clad chorus-girls, so new forms of technology began to

provide opportunities to enjoy entertainments which were normally beyond the social pale.

In 1899, Leno had 'broadcast' live to Queen Victoria as part of a programme of entertainment relayed by telephone link between St James' Hall, Piccadilly, and Windsor Castle; and as early as 1893 he is reputed to have made recordings for J. L. Young's Phonograph Office in London. The comedian certainly became one of the first recording stars, with at least 35 discs issued by the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in the early 1900s. Leno also appeared in many films by Birt Acres, the Warwick Trading Company and the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and it is likely that a number of these were reproduced for use with the Kinora.

The Kinora and the early Gramophone (introduced into England in 1898) were both heralded as wonders of the age. They both catered for a relatively prosperous family audience, providing a wide selection of instructional and 'quality' entertainment, leavened with broader material from music-hall and musical comedy. The price of both instruments was high; in 1903 the Kinora sold for three guineas, exactly the same price as the cheapest Gramophone.

'Now is the time to buy a Gramophone for the Summer Evenings in the Garden,' announced an advertisement in *Pearson's Weekly* in July 1903. 'Everyone is fascinated and delighted with the Gramophone when played across the river or under the trees on the lawn. There is no need to stay in town and spend the evening in the heated air of the City when the Gramophone brings to your home the voices of all the most popular singers. The Opera is expensive. The Gramophone is inexpensive. Going to the Theatre entails catching the last train. On the Gramophone you can hear in your own garden Sarah Bernhardt's sympathetic



Mrs Patrick Campbell:  
a Biograph postcard.

and dramatic voice. On the Gramophone you can listen and laugh at G. P. Huntley's quaint sayings. The Music Hall is hot and smoky. On the Gramophone Dan Leno will make your evening in the country a right merry one.' With a few variations, the advertisement could have applied equally to the Kinora.

A Kinora reel showing Leno and his wife struggling to open a bottle of champagne in the garden of Springfield House, their Balham home, was recently discovered in the Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock, Wiltshire. It seems likely that similar items remain to be identified, evidence for other British Mutoscope and Biograph films being provided by four stills credited to the company and published in J. Hickory Wood's *Dan Leno* (London, 1905).

'Birthday Rejoicings' is clearly from another take featuring the same scene as the existing Kinora reel, while 'In the Bosom of His Family' appears to have been filmed on the same occasion.

A Kinora advertisement of 1902, featuring Edna May.

THE LATEST & GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT

# ANIMATED PHOTOGRAPHY

**THE KINORA**

'Dan Leno Plays Cricket' is almost certainly from *Dan Leno Fooling in the Charity Cricket Match at Kennington Oval* (exhibited in October 1901), and 'The Editor and His Sub' is a still from *Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell Edit the Sun* (April 1902). The latter was prompted by a publicity stunt in which Leno edited an April Fool version of the *Sun* newspaper and its simple plot can be reconstructed from a series of twelve stills published in the *Black and White Budget* of 5 April 1902.

The diminutive Leno struggles with his 16-stone pantomime partner over the editorial desk, finally upsetting a tray of copy which flutters to the floor as he takes the only chair. The same painted backcloth, depicting a book-lined study, had been used earlier in the year when the well-known actor Cyril Maude filmed a famous stuttering scene from the Haymarket Theatre production of *Frocks and Frills* (illustrated with twelve 'Biograms' in the *Black and White Budget*). Further clues to the theatrical content of British Mutoscope and Biograph productions may be provided by a short-lived series of sepia-toned 'Biograph' postcards issued in 1902-1903. Leno and Maude are featured, but portraits of G. P. Huntley, Mrs Patrick Campbell and Edna May might indicate unrecorded items.

Paper-print material is not limited to the theatre, of course, and all kinds of topical views survive. A Kinora reel of which at least two copies are known to exist shows a biplane taking off at the Crystal Palace in about 1910; others depict street scenes, military parades, boxing matches, horse races, in fact the whole gamut of early newsreel coverage. Even the reels showing Edwardian families have a period charm which it would be sad to lose.

Mutoscopes were heavily used and this, combined with commercial exigencies, means that very few from the earliest period have survived. Kinora reels have received much gentler treatment, but even so the individually mounted prints are likely to become loose and detached. Filoscopes suffer the same problems and are also more vulnerable to wear at their exposed edges. Some efforts have been made to film this interesting material; David Kenten, for instance, has included several reconstituted paper prints in the Anglia Television programme *Bygones*, although, as he points out, single frame copying is very laborious.

Unfortunately, as the Mutoscope, Kinora and pocket cinematograph form a blind alley in the development of the film, they have either been overlooked or else regarded as quaint optical toys, with little attention paid to the film-generated material which they employed. The opportunity to retrieve items generally thought to be lost in the course of time does not often occur. With the cinema approaching its hundredth anniversary, it would be a tragic oversight if these ghosts of early films were not given a new and permanent life.

# CANNES 43

REPORTS BY DEREK MALCOLM AND IAN CHRISTIE

If Cannes 1990 was the best festival for weather and the worst for business for some years, it was a medium good year for new films. Indeed, the problem for Bernardo Bertolucci's jury was how to recognise enough worthy competition entries in the prize-list, even if there was no really obvious choice for the Palme d'Or.

In the end, it was David Lynch's brilliantly manufactured but uneven *Wild at Heart*, very much a successor to the much-admired *Blue Velvet*, that got the nod, a choice received with as many catcalls as cheers. And at least three entrants which deserved a prize of some sort got nothing at all—Karel Kachyna's 21-year-old *The Ear*, one of the best and most surprising of the nine Czech films banned shortly after their making in 1969, Bertrand Tavernier's beautifully acted three-hander, *Daddy Nostalgie*, and Zhang Yimou and Yang Fengliang's *Ju Dou* (*Secret Love, Hidden Faces*), a co-production between China and Japan which ravished the eye but did not do so wholly at the expense of the mind.

Two more competition films might have won something in a different year—Clint Eastwood's highly entertaining *White Hunter, Black Heart*, in which Eastwood impersonates John Huston and speaks, like Garbo once

talked, with surprising eloquence, and Giuseppe Tornatore's *Everybody's Fine*, the charming if lightweight successor to *Cinema Paradiso*.

*Wild at Heart* virtually describes itself, through the mouth of one of its protagonists, as 'wild at heart and weird on top'. It is indeed a very strange affair, half joking and half in earnest about the wellsprings of American violence. Its harried lovers, a very contemporary version of Bonnie and Clyde escaping not from the law but from the wrath of the girl's mad mother, cavort as if sex was a dance of death and violence a playground game. They are not so much unpleasant as victims of a suburban society whose culture is as ugly a manifestation as ever hit the world squarely between the eyes, and whose efforts to find the wherewithal to espouse it wreak the kind of havoc of which historic notables like Attila the Hun would be proud. Nothing is spared us, from exploding heads to dogs running off with the severed hands of the injured. But this is not Jodorowsky's Theatre of Cruelty so much as Lynch's version of the Theatre of the Absurd, in which every rose has a worm in the bud and a whole bush of them denotes Armageddon.

The first hour is astonishing, if you can take this sort of thing at all. But the second betrays a good many hesitations, as if there is really nowhere to go

but downhill. And the final reel is jokey enough to seem as if Lynch is patting us on the head after delivering a series of hammer blows to the cranium which he didn't really mean to cause concussion after all.

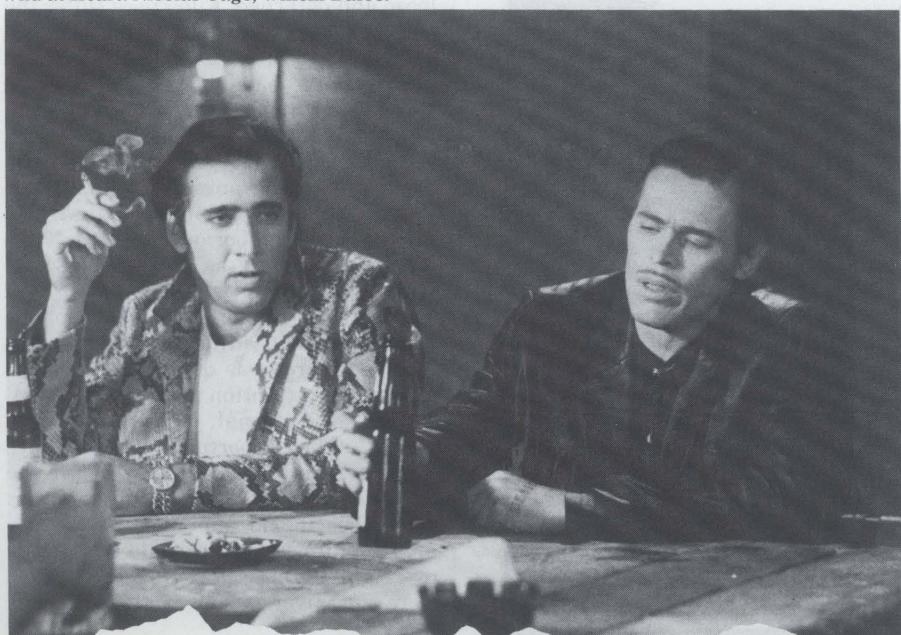
Eye-catching playing from Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern as the lovers, and from Diane Ladd as the girl's mother (she is also mother off the screen) and Harry Dean Stanton as her own lover, doubling as private detective, adds to the feeling that this is an exceptional piece of direction that doesn't quite add up to a truly exceptional film.

It seemed a great mistake to ignore the claims of *The Ear*, a succinct little parable about Stalinism that also dared to be funny as well as frightening but never pitched over into Grand Guignol like the Lynch film. A middle-ranking functionary goes with his tipsy wife to a party given by the Comrade Leader, only to discover that the Minister who has been his patron has been summarily dismissed. Departing uneasily for home, he spends a long night of anxiety waiting for the inevitable to happen, peeking out at the security police parked outside and discovering that even his bathroom and kitchen have been bugged (he knew about the rest of the house). Meanwhile, his wife tells him that he is not only a cold political toady but a loveless man as well, though still clinging to him like an affectionate leech as the night progresses. They have only got each other now.

This rough-edged but extremely perceptive study, marvellously acted by Radek Brzobohaty and Jirina Bohdálová, reminded some of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* crossed with Kafka. It is a real find, comfortably exceeding its reputation for cheeky audacity and containing a pay-off sequence no other film I saw at Cannes could match.

One reason for the catcalls when *Wild at Heart* was announced as the winner may have been that many of the audience expected *Daddy Nostalgie* to be the choice. Few would have been surprised, since this highly personal film about coming to terms with impending death manages to avoid mawkishness and turn what could have been rather depressing viewing into something better. Dedicated to Michael Powell but completed soon after the death of Tavernier's own father, it has Dirk Bogarde as a self-centred but not unattractive Englishman, retired in the South of

*Wild at Heart*: Nicolas Cage, Willem Dafoe.



France, being nursed hopefully back to health after a severe collapse by his wife (Odette Laure) and daughter (Jane Birkin). The principal relationship is between the invalid and his once-neglected daughter, a disaster area where love is eventually sown.

There are all kinds of pitfalls into which a film of this nature could fall, but such is the precision of the playing and the slow-burning emotional force of the argument that its finally affirmative stance does not seem fraudulent. And both Bogarde, returning to the screen as if he had never been away, and Birkin, who has never flourished so well as beside this kind of quiet virtuosity, do everything Tavernier could possibly have asked of them.

If the Tavernier film shows that you can use the widescreen to tell so intimate a story, *Secret Love, Hidden Faces* profits from the sheer sumptuousness of its colour within the smaller frame. It makes rural China of the 1920s look like a far-off paradise, but tells a story which suggests that it might just have been hell on earth. A violent and probably impotent middle-aged husband wants a child by his young wife, who escapes into the willing arms of one of his workers at the cloth mill. When the older man falls and incapacitates himself while chasing the lovers, they grow bolder. The affair is conducted in front of his eyes and, now an enfeebled cripple, he can do nothing about it. But as the son of the liaison grows up, believing the old man to be his father, revenge is nigh.

The film gives more reminders of a Hollywood movie of the 1940s than of the Fifth Generation of film-makers in China. Edward G. Robinson as the fuming old man might have been even better casting. But if looks could kill, it



*The Comfort of Strangers:* Natasha Richardson, Rupert Everett.

would not be those of the old man, at one point strung up in a bucketlike basket and lifted up out of harm's way, but of the film itself. Almost every frame is a joy to behold, though apparently not for the Chinese authorities, who have quietly dropped it from the cinemas and cut it for foreign audiences, possibly because of its implied erotic content.

Tornatore's *Everybody's Fine* is even more openly nostalgic than *Cinema Paradiso* and has the same tendency to stretch its thinnish material to breaking point. But his tale about an old man from the provinces (Marcello Mastroianni) in search of his busy children in the big city was much applauded both at its press and public screenings. It has many good moments, most of which involve the old man's reaction to the modern urban world, and Mastroianni, a master at doing nothing much supremely well, becomes the heart and soul

of the proceedings, whether peering through glasses that make his eyes twice as big to the viewer, or pushing babies out of the way of the television screen to which they are hooked and successfully substituting a washing machine. But it is slender stuff and, at two hours, very long-winded.

The festival opened with Kurosawa's uneven but splendid-looking *Dreams* and closed with Paul Schrader's *The Comfort of Strangers*, in which a young English couple (Rupert Everett and Natasha Richardson) get preyed upon by a very odd couple indeed (Christopher Walken and Helen Mirren) in the kind of Venice sketched more audaciously by Roeg in *Don't Look Now*. But Schrader's silky smooth and highly professional style does something for the story, translated ably enough by Harold Pinter from the Ian McEwan novella and played, by Walken in particular, with spectacular if icy aplomb. D. M.

**F**or ten days each May it's easy to forget the world off-screen, as Cannes becomes a true global village, catering to countless special interests within and around the capacious bran-tub of 'le festival international du film'. But perhaps the most telling evidence of a continuing faith in cinema came this year on French television, when 15 May saw all five channels clear their schedules for a simultaneous transmission of Resnais' harrowing *Night and Fog*. This response to the anti-semitic outrages sweeping France was largely co-ordinated from Cannes by the film's producer, Anatole Dauman. Meanwhile, off-screen drama at the festival itself was mainly confined to the British journalists who protested vigorously against Ken Loach's *Hidden Agenda* being seen to 'represent' Britain in competition.

Alexander Walker wrote of protests during the screening he attended, but I can only report rapt attention and applause from the main morning show. Whatever anti-consensual polemics might have been expected from Loach

and his long-time writing partner Jim Allen, this remains very much within the now-familiar domain of Stalker-Wright revelations, with a central renegade figure perhaps based on Wallace.

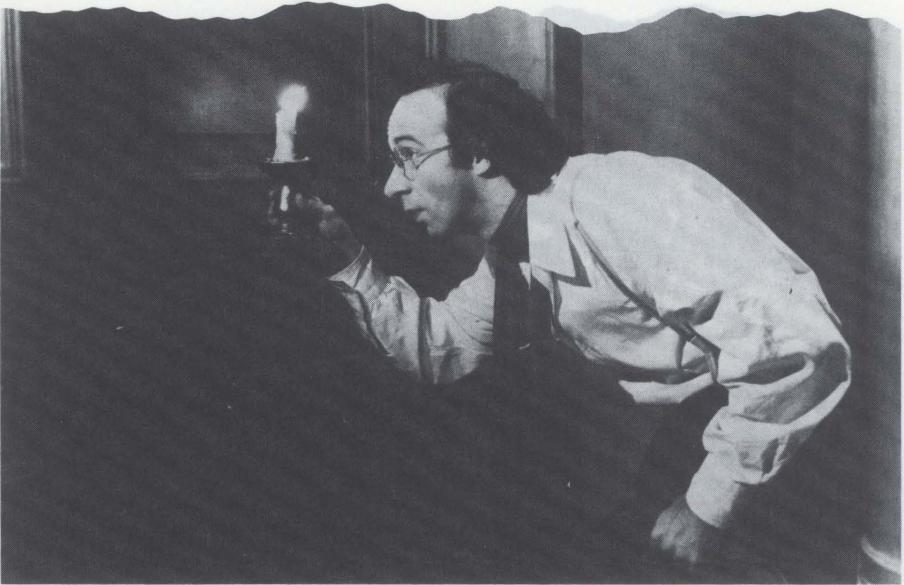
The film's concern is less the rights and wrongs of Republicanism, than how a 'dirty war' taints all concerned, and how 'security' can become a cloak for profoundly anti-democratic impulses in a society as secretive as Britain. If the framing story of the killing of an American civil rights lawyer seems rather sub-Costa-Gavras, there is none the less a cogent moral underpinning to the taut police-procedural narrative which leads Brian Cox's sturdy English detective to a heart of darkness from which he—and we—instinctively recoil.

If this were about the impact of the Algerian War on France or Sicilian politics, would the Brits respect it more as cinema? Fortunately for Loach, his stock abroad remains high, as the special Jury Prize attested. Coincidentally, there were two other films from Ulster which provided useful insights into this ethnographic enigma. One was Thaddeus O'Sullivan's handsome rendering

of a bleak tale by Sam Hanna Bell, *December Bride*, seen in the Directors' Fortnight. Comparisons with the emotional and physical rigours of *On the Black Hill* (which O'Sullivan shot) are inevitable, but this account of a feisty servant girl who establishes a *ménage à trois* with two Presbyterian farming brothers on the shores of Strangford Lough captures with rare authenticity a culture built on stubborn pride and self-righteousness.

The Market provided a chance to catch Margo Harkin's vivid, demotic study of growing up Catholic in the ghettos of the Bogside and Creggan estates, *Hush-a-Bye Baby*, an impressive production from the Derry Film and Video Workshop. Again, the focus is less on politics than the personal, but latter-day inflections of the tribal experience provide some poignant and hilarious moments—among the latter, a splendid (subtitled) encounter between two Gaelic learners and a fluent British Army soldier. As in *December Bride*, sexuality out of wedlock dramatises the contradictions of a culture resolutely wedded to the past.

Probably the main agenda on many



*Voices of the Moon*: Roberto Benigni.

minds was Eastern Europe. Cannes offered lavish opportunity to sample the current state of Soviet pluralism and the first fruits of East-West co-production. Was it significant that far and away the best Soviet films—and among the best from anywhere—both paid little heed to foreign curiosity? Vitali Kanevski's *Freeze, Die, Get Up* was a remarkable first feature, drawn from childhood experience and set in a remote mining town near Vladivostok just after the war. From the viewpoint of the 12-year-old hero, Japanese war prisoners and Soviet 'politicals' are equally exotic features in an otherwise grim landscape, but there's nothing gloomy about this eloquent and vigorously imaginative film, which can stand comparison with *Ivan Lapshin*.

Relegated to the Market after its official Berlin debut, Kira Muratova's astonishing *Asthenic Syndrome* feels like three or four interlocking novellas and indeed begins with a complete film-within-a-film in the vein of her earlier *Long Farewells*. But as it continues apace, alternately fantastic, grotesque and epigrammatic, the suspicion grows that its subject is more universal than even 'the Russian condition', with a cataleptic hero ('sleep is a moderate form of protest') passing as if in a dream through all the institutions that define his life. After Muratova's shamefully unseen *Change of Fate*, this should place her firmly at the centre of any map of contemporary cinema.

With acrimonious public rows reported almost daily between the umbrella organisation Sovexportfilm and Soviet studios keen to explore their independence, East-West business prospects may seem dubious. But there is no shortage of ambitious Western partners, and Marin Karmitz's Franco-Soviet production *Taxi Blues* (in competition) arguably made the best case for this strategy to date. Directed by an established scenarist, Pavel Lungin, after a vital spell in France unlearning 'normal Soviet self-censorship', it certainly reaches layers of Moscow low-life hitherto unseen in Soviet cinema, with the novel glare of neon and video on

midnight streets and an authentic car chase. The central love-hate relationship between a redneck taxi-driver and a footloose sax player who tries to double-cross him may be schematic, but it probes class tensions and ambivalent attitudes towards the West in a novel way.

Yuri Ilienko's *Swan Lake: The Zone* (with us and Swedish money) claims a different, more lurid authenticity, with gory if almost entirely symbolic action set in and around the very Ukrainian prison where Paradzhanov is said to have written its script. To judge from a quaintly sexy billboard on the Croisette, the Italian co-producers of Vasily Pichul's follow-up to *Little Vera, Dark Are the Nights on the Black Sea*, were hoping for something exploitable. But they hadn't reckoned on Pichul substituting his own interminable cut for the 'agreed' export version, while published synopses implied even more unfunny (and distinctly unerotic) episodes in the life of a love-struck con-man—doubtless shot for the mini-series version.

*The Mother*: Inna Churikova.



Ironically, Cinecittà probably enabled Panfilov to produce a more lavish period remake of Gorki's *The Mother* than the new cost-conscious Mosfilm would have allowed. This had its staunch admirers, of whom I was not one, despite respect for Inna Churikova's eponymous heroism; but few spoke up for Fellini's first production away from Cinecittà, *Voices of the Moon*. More than his recent autobiographical films, this relatively restrained extravaganza creates a 'world'—admittedly one born of the derangement of two madmen (it's based on a recent novel, *Poem of the Lunatics*)—but the level of visual, and above all verbal, contrivance seems to me, quite literally, prodigious. Roberto Benigni and Paolo Villaggio are the Laurel and Hardy pair who try to make sense of a world, at once menacing and absurd, that has rejected them. The themes are familiar, but here reinvented with a verve that recalls Fellini's roots in the ancient tradition of carnival.

*End of the Night* was the best American independent debut I saw, a remarkable low-budget fantasy of self-annihilation by British expatriate Kevin McNally, shot by Tom DiCillo (*Stranger Than Paradise*) in striking retro-noir style, with Eric Mitchell compulsively trying to lose himself in a city of dreadful night as the birth of his first child approaches. A superb New York movie that reconnects realism with surrealism (recalling the latter's roots in male anxiety) to oneiric effect.

Male anxiety also plays an important part in Idrissa Ouedraogo's mesmerising *Tilai* (*The Law*), in view of the draconian tribal penalty imposed on philanderers in his artfully idealised Burkina Faso village. Improving, if anything, on Ouedraogo's *Yaaba*, with superb night sequences in addition to the same sly humour, this proved the most sheerly accomplished film in the festival and it justly won the Jury's Grand Prix. I.C.

# STILL WAVING not drowning

Ten years have elapsed since *la Nouvelle Vague* came of age. True, it began early and spread wide. Between 1958 and 1962, at least 97 new directors made their first feature films in France. Agnès Varda was ahead of them all, with *La Pointe courte*, in 1955. Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins* appeared in 1958; so did Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* and *Les Amants*. Jacques Rivette's *Paris nous appartient*, begun in that year, was completed in 1961; and Agnès Varda's second full-length picture, *Cleo de 5 à 7*, was not shown until 1962. But the main vintage—just 31 years ago—was in 1959. That was the year of Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, Godard's *A bout de souffle*, Resnais' *Hiroshima, mon amour* and Rohmer's *Le Signe du Lion*—not released in Paris until three years later.

Looking back on those early efforts, French and other critics have discovered imperfections. *La Pointe courte* clearly lacks experience. *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins* seem moralistic and ambiguous. *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* has an implausible plot. *Les Amants* is literary and no longer shocking. *Paris nous appartient* needs stylistic coherence. *Cleo de 5 à 7* could do with more narrative rigour. *Les Quatre Cents Coups* mismatches classical and neorealist modes. *A bout de souffle* is morally equivocal. *Hiroshima, mon amour* barely marries its two themes. *Le Signe du Lion*, with its repetitive music, is both thin and slow.

It takes imagination or memory, in fact, to realise the shock the New Wave delivered to a cinema in which Julien Duvivier and Marcel Carné were still big names. No more opulent studio décor; no more stately establishing shots; no more portentous silhouettes; no more *monstres-sacrés* cast-lists; no more—or not much more—high-flown dialogue; no more neat plot parabolas and theatrical punctuation by curtain-lines; no more misty, fatalistic fade-outs; no more sense of the cinema as boulevard entertainment, or safe bourgeois Art with a capital A.

Of course there had been antecedents: Jean Vigo, early René Clair, Jean

## RICHARD MAYNE FINDS THAT THREE VETERANS OF THE FRENCH NEW WAVE HAVE THEIR HEADS WELL ABOVE WATER

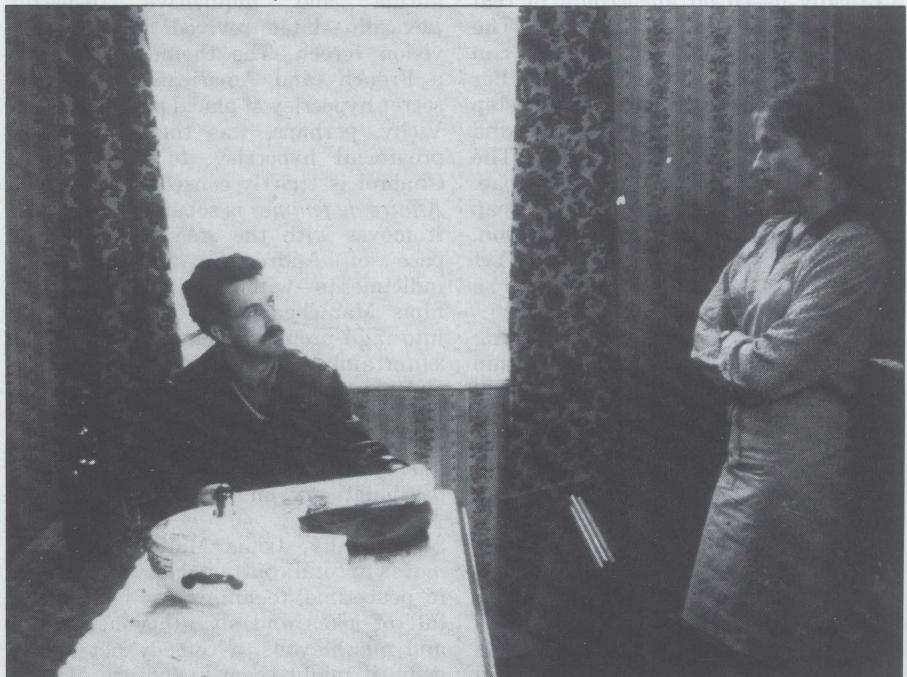
Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jacques Becker, Jean Cocteau. But new technology had come to the aid of innovation—and what it made possible was impatience. Fast film, lightweight cameras, good synchronised sound: these broke the hold of the arc lights and the studio—and they cut costs. Younger, sharper people could now raise enough money to graduate from short films to features; and some critical and commercial successes had a snowball effect. A whole new vocabulary of techniques invaded the cinematic vernacular: zooms, jump-cuts, hand-held camerawork, overlapping soundtracks, and shots almost subliminally brief. Television has since

exploited them all to the point where they seem banal.

Yet, unlike American 'underground cinema', the French New Wave was not an uncompromising *avant-garde*. It had learned above all from American mainstream movies, including a postwar crop of crime features notable in those days for their location work. Even its most provocative directors—Godard, Rivette and Resnais—respected production values; while Truffaut, Varda, Chabrol, Malle and Rohmer managed to combine mild provocation with mass popularity. Malle and Chabrol, in particular, sprinkled their filmographies with works of very general appeal—so much so that Chabrol, a few years ago, was accused in France of 'facile commercialism', while Malle was dismissed as 'a talented *touche-à-tout*'.

Today, Truffaut is dead, Rivette remains a minority taste, Varda's fine films have become infrequent, Godard has grown ever more eccentric, and Resnais' *I Want to Go Home* (1988) has largely pleased only the French. But Chabrol, Malle and Rohmer have

*Une Affaire de femmes*: François Cluzet, Isabelle Huppert.



soldiered on; and three of their most recent films show how much they have matured since the heady days when *la Nouvelle Vague* was new. Chabrol's is *Une Affaire de femmes* (1988); Malle's is *Milou en mai* (1989); Rohmer's is *Conte de printemps* (1990).

All three have more in common than their directors' New Wave past. Each, naturally enough, takes for granted the technical bravura that then appeared so novel. Each assumes confident complicity with an alert, sophisticated audience. And each of the three pictures, for all their apparent disparity, uses its central and visible plot to illuminate a wider area. In each case, an off-screen presence, treated obliquely, is the real subject of the film.

The actual plot of Claude Chabrol's *Une Affaire de femmes* is a linear descent into hell. The time is the Nazi Occupation. Marie (Isabelle Huppert, breathtaking) is a housewife who would have liked to be a singer. Instead, she has to struggle to bring up two children: her husband (François Cluzet) is a prisoner-of-war. A distressed neighbour asks her help to end an embarrassing pregnancy. She complies. Soon afterwards, her husband returns, but wounded and unable to work. To stretch the family budget, Marie begins to accept money and gifts for performing other abortions. She has become a near-professional 'faiseuse d'anges'.

Then Lucie (Marie Trintignant), a local prostitute, asks to rent a room for business—and introduces her to a male friend (Nils Tavernier). Before long, he becomes her lover. At length, her cuckolded husband finds how the family has obtained its little wartime luxuries. Humiliated, desperately jealous, he denounces his wife to the authorities. For an abortionist, Vichy justice means the guillotine. It beheads her on 31 July 1943.

Broadly based on an account of real events, this is a distressing film. The spectator, wiser than the heroine, can only sit and watch as Marie treads her fatal primrose path. One small step leads quietly to another: misgivings and standards are gradually sapped. The first abortion involves a bar of soap. Afterwards, Marie asks for the soap back—not to perform another operation, but simply because soap is scarce. Yet we know all too well that it will soon be misused again.

The war, by removing and weakening Marie's husband, by imposing hardship and encouraging subterfuge, is clearly one cause of the tragedy. So is the pious severity of the Vichy régime. But *Une Affaire de femmes*, as its title implies, keeps political facts in the background, as much part of the routine décor as they seemed to many at the time. Most of the film, claustrophobically shot by Chabrol's favourite cinematographer Jean Rabier, takes place in Marie's stuffy apartment, slowly growing plush and crowded beyond its deserts. A Nazi



*Milou en mai: Miou-Miou.*

raid, the death of a Resistance man: these are almost noises off, like bombs or sirens, distant reminders of where we are, and when. Only at the end does cruel outside reality strike home; and Marie breathes a bitter, angry prayer. To herself or to the Blessed Virgin? Chabrol leaves us wondering. To some, the words seem sentimental; to others, blasphemous. In Paris, the film aroused contradictory protests, and one person was killed by a tear-gas grenade.

Others were differently disconcerted. In recent years, Chabrol has become widely popular for his 'provincial' detective stories, with Jean Poiret as the abrupt and inquisitive Inspector Lavardin—later revived on the television screen. The theme of them is a French (and American) cliché—the secret hypocrisy of placid provincial life. Vichy, perhaps, was the ultimate in provincial hypocrisy: to that extent, Chabrol is strictly consistent. But *Une Affaire de femmes* is sober, not sardonic: it moves with the steady, implacable pace of André Cayatte's 'judicial' indictments—without, however, those films' Manichean, over-emphatic lapses into agit-prop. No one could call it 'entertaining' in the boulevard sense; and its intensity discourages talk of Art. Its gravity and subtlety surely qualify it as one of Chabrol's most enduring achievements, with a firm, compassionate grip on its ethical lifeline.

Superficially, Louis Malle's *Milou en mai* is in total contrast. Set in the South in peacetime, teeming with characters, full of jokes and sly allusions, sunny and mischievous, a comedy not a tragedy, it might seem to confirm Malle's

sometime reputation as a maverick. Certainly, he was never a card-carrying *Cahiers du Cinéma* activist: but he was at least on the fringes of the New Wave, and Truffaut valued him highly, especially for *Zazie dans le métro*—'un film follement ambitieux et d'un courage immense'. In fact, *Milou en mai* is also madly ambitious, and its boldness in teasing a cherished theme has led to attacks on it in France.

Once again, cliché plays a part: this time, the vultures who gather to hear the reading of a will. The deceased is an old lady (Paulette Dubost) whose 60-year-old son Milou (Michel Piccoli) has been happily neglecting the family estate in the Gers, to the west of Toulouse. His bucolic pleasures—fishing, bee-keeping, bedding his housekeeper—are interrupted when the relatives descend. They include a selfish, dishy blonde daughter (Miou-Miou), an anxious brother, an English in-law (Harriet Walter) and an angry lesbian niece. The will, as always, is a disappointment and a bone to pick: but more embarrassing is the fact that this is May 1968. In faraway Paris, the radio reports student riots; and even here in the South-West the gravediggers have gone on strike.

So Madame lies in state in the library—until rumours of revolution, even in this rustic enclave, spook the family into taking to the woods. Out they all trapse, with aspirins, laxatives and other essentials, incongruous as the tottery ladies on their high heels in some Jacques Tati farce. Then they, too, are infected by the spirit of the May évenements. They dream of living the simple life. They share a joint, puffing



Conte de printemps: Anne Teyssèdre.

like gaffers. They grope inconclusively towards free love.

In the end, of course, convention is re-established. The local capitalist even poisons a stream. Precious possessions, it's clear, will be scattered and wasted on greedy heirs: only the housekeeper, an unexpected legatee who now plans to marry her young fiancé, will really benefit from the will. As for Milou, who knows? His lazy stoicism, superbly conveyed by Piccoli, never so relaxed and florid, will probably enable him to enjoy his remaining years.

On the surface, then, this is a cheerful picture, endorsing scapegrace pastoral values, with even some nods towards ecological Greens. It includes incidental felicities: a swarm of bees writhing on a peasant's head and shoulders, a dizzy tracking shot of a bicycle ride, a sweet modulation from seemingly classical violin music into the joyous syncopation of Stéphane Grappelli. Yet, on analysis, the film's depiction of the *bourgeoisie de province* is no less scathing than in some of Chabrol's movies; and its real subject, like that of *Une Affaire de femmes*, is treated mainly off-screen.

What *Milou en mai* is saying, in fact, is what attracted hostility in Paris: that the 1968 student riots, as Raymond Aron was reviled for pointing out, were chiefly an intoxicating charade. For nostalgic *soixante-huitards*, this was an unwelcome message, hardly compatible with their notion of *la Nouvelle Vague*.

In reality, questioning received wisdom was always the New Wave's habit; and in his best films of the last twenty years, Louis Malle has quietly and firmly done just that. *Lacombe Lucien*,

in 1974, blew up a storm of protest because naive viewers thought it an apology for wartime collaboration. *Au revoir les enfants*, painfully autobiographical, hinted at guilt and self-accusation for adolescent insouciance. And when I last saw Malle he was musing about a film on the *épuration*, the postwar settling of Occupation scores. There seems nothing conformist about such prickly, uncomfortable concerns. In that respect, the New Wave lives on.

The most recent film to come from a New Wave veteran is Eric Rohmer's *Conte de printemps*, the first in a new series, *Contes de quatre saisons*, planned as a sequel to *Contes moraux* and *Comédies et proverbes*. Unlike some of Rohmer's recent improvised films, this is tightly scripted. Like the best of the *Contes moraux*, it explores ethical dilemmas with a delicate, fastidious elegance which borders on moral pedantry. Yet here, too, the main subject remains largely off-screen.

The film opens wordlessly with Jeanne, a bright young teacher, striding out of a suburban school, the Lycée Jacques Brel. To the accompaniment of a Beethoven sonata, she drives to an empty, untidy apartment—her absent boyfriend's. Grabbing a few possessions, she migrates to another, her own—fresh, clean and orderly, but still occupied by the girl to whom she has lent it. Thwarted, she mooches off to a dismal party; and there she meets a fluffy piano student, Natacha (Florence Darel), who invites her home.

Home is her separated parents' flat, deserted now because Natacha's father

is living with his latest *petite amie*. Unexpectedly, they all meet. The *petite amie* is a philosophy student: Natacha hates her, and would rather like Jeanne to take her place. So, it seems, would the restless father (Hugues Quester, unhappily questing). But Jeanne allows him only three favours: to sit beside her, hold her hand and kiss her once. That—give or take a subplot about a missing necklace—is more or less all.

Like so many of Rohmer's stories, *Conte de printemps* slips through the mesh of a summary. Even in retrospect (after one viewing, that is), it seems slight. Yet it holds the attention at the time like poetry or a theorem—limpid, logical and sharp. So much is left for the viewer to pick up through understated clues: a portrait of Wittgenstein on a bookshelf, Kant and Plato packed into a bag. And, as so often, the pictures are pretty and the words precise. Rohmer's world is so swept and garnished: it might be that of a mathematical conundrum. 'Three young girls have seventeen fresh brown eggs and five yellow baskets. How can they ensure that they enjoy fair shares?'

What is at issue, in fact, is moral philosophy: that and its teaching is the real presence off-screen. Jeanne teaches philosophy; the *petite amie* studies it. At one point, over a meal, they stage a serried, baffling debate. More telling still, Anne Teyssèdre, who plays Jeanne, is not only neat, poised, attractive and highly intelligent: she is also *licenciée en philo*—as, now, is Eloise Bennett, who plays the *petite amie*. Their dialogue carries real conviction, confirming Rohmer's claim that the film's true theme is teaching and philosophical discovery.

This is not to say that its meaning is crystal clear. Rohmer himself, in a recent *Cahiers du Cinéma* interview, produced at least one verbal thicket, here translated *au pied de la lettre*. 'On that level, I also defend my theoretical position as a critic in so far as my post-Bazinian attitude is inspired equally by an ontology, as Bazin used to say, that is by a transcendental philosophy or a phenomenology which is not concerned with psychoanalytic or semiological explanations.' As Dylan Thomas once remarked, 'Isn't education wonderful?'

Truth to tell, there is little of such verbiage in *Conte de printemps*; and Rohmer's own beliefs are the reverse of obscurantist. As in *Ma nuit chez Maud*, as in *Le genou de Claire*, what he upholds—against the unconscious—is the primacy of intellect and the duty of choice. He dislikes, he says, much of the French cinema of the 1970s and 80s: 'the cult of the image, a certain paroxysm, a taste for violence, a kind of expressionism, theatricality and megalomania on the director's part, the need to reach a huge public and employ stars.' Veterans of the preview theatres will know what he means. Other veterans of the French New Wave will surely applaud. ■

## RAVELLING UP DREAMS

Apparently Kurosawa has signed on to make another film and we must wish him luck with this venture, yet in the nature of things—the director is over 80—it is possible that *Dreams* (Warner Bros) will be his swansong. The film does seem to be a summation of sorts, not least because of its simplicity of theme and its personal directness—attributes of the work of aged artists from Titian and Rembrandt to Renoir and Matisse. Is it as great as the late work of these artists? Is it a great work at all? Criticism, so far, has been divided.

The press handout was unusually austere, a sequence of stills and the cast-list. Yet even without reading a production blurb, I would imagine that the title is to be taken literally: these are dreams (and nightmares) which Kurosawa has actually experienced and which stayed in the memory in the way that certain iconic dreams do, to haunt or console. One deduces this from the oddly private and even arbitrary quality of several episodes. They have been tidied up, of course, to be changed into cinematic spectacle; yet the details and transitions of emotion remain unpredictable and quirky: you feel that such touches could not or would not be invented.

The film opens with a summer downpour. 'Rain in bright sunshine: it's when foxes go courting in the forest,' mother says to little Akira, aged five or so, who promptly goes off to explore. In the forest, beautifully shot (no one shoots rain like Kurosawa), the foxes, actually human dancers, are in stealthy procession. Passing a tree, they spy the child, who hurries back home in fright. But his dream-mother is severe and presents the little boy with a dagger in a sheath. 'They have seen you, haven't they? You must commit suicide!'

The second and third episodes have a strange dark melancholy. In the former, a party of climbers is struggling in a blizzard; the leader encourages his men, urging them above all not to fall asleep. An angel appears and, pressing a magic blanket over the leader's shoulders, lulls him to the verge of unconsciousness. He shakes her off (obviously she is a demon, not an angel), but finds that his followers are dead.

Immediate transition to episode three. Now we are in the war, or near the end of it. Twilight: a fierce dog, wearing a body vest that seems to contain bombs, barks at a lonely officer. From the end of a tunnel a ghost platoon in full marching gear emerges and halts. The officer addresses the soldiers, urging them in hectoring tones to turn back, which they eventually do. Fiercer than ever, the dog continues to bark at the officer . . . (The underlying emotion



Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*.

of this fantasy is cowardice, sadness, fear.)

The next episode is altogether brighter, though it too has sinister elements, notably in its crow-haunted ending. This is the celebrated Van Gogh sequence—celebrated because the painter is impersonated by none other than Martin Scorsese. Some critics, alas, have found this risible, perhaps because Scorsese does so little to play down the accents of Little Italy. Yet after all, there are not many lines of dialogue at issue: the sequence is predominantly visual, consisting mainly of Akira as a young man wandering in splendid Van Gogh landscapes, photographed now naturalistically (with 'real' fields, bridges, buildings), now by reference to the paintings themselves which, thanks to the skill of matte processes, have been 'three-dimensionalised', allowing the actor to enter the compositions in most literal detail.

Two further episodes introduce violent, apocalyptic anxieties. In the first, there is general panic as Mount Fuji sheds its skin in multiple explosions caused, we hear, not by natural eruption but by the meltdown of six nearby nuclear reactors. (Why six? A typical and, one hopes, dream-invented detail.) Japan, anyhow, is an island, and there is not enough room for Akira and his companions, who include a mother and her two children, to escape from the different radioactive gases—gases which have been thoughtfully individualised: you can tell what is killing you by its distinctive colouring. Where to go? Where to fly to? At the edge of a cliff, the only option seems suicide.

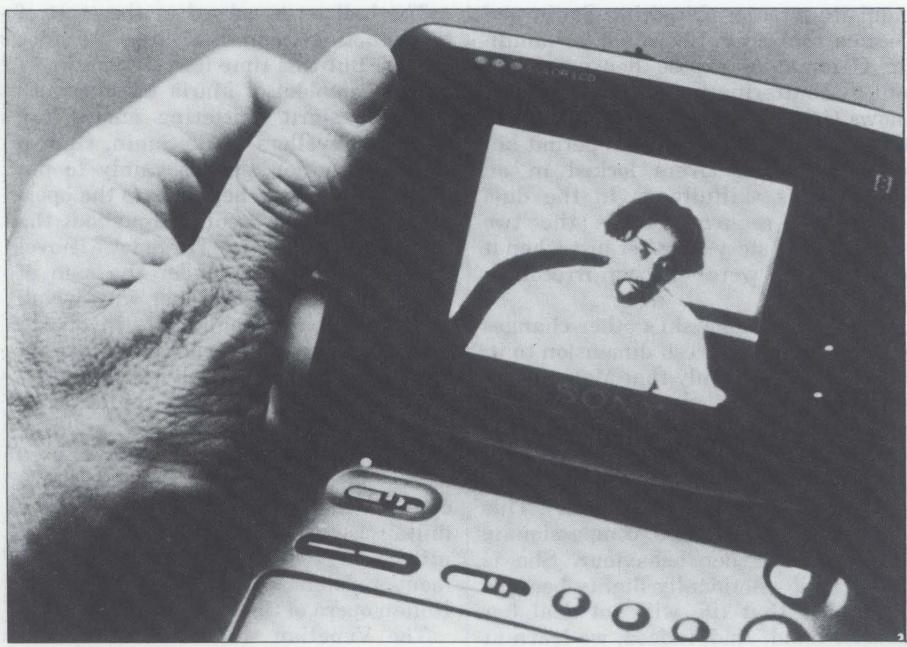
Yet in the second apocalyptic episode our hero, now alone, has survived into a post-nuclear landscape of dark volcanic ash. He meets a groaning demon with

horns and sees dandelions that have mutated into giant sunflowers. In the valley beneath them he spies other horned humans beside a lake, engaged in what looks like a hopeless lament, a choral ballet of despair.

Switch, with relief, to the final episode, a complete contrast in tone and sensibility. Instead of anguish, peace and serenity; instead of consuming fire, solacing winter. A village on a river, served by stately waterwheels: flowers and children wherever you look. An old man (played by Ozu's favourite alter ego, Chishu Ryu, now aged 86) gives our hero cogent reasons for death to be 'happy'. And indeed that procession coming towards us with its merry sound of drums and cymbals, could it be?—yes, it is—a funeral. Evidently, joy is the right note to go out on.

In the reviews of the film from Cannes, there was a repeated disappointed reference to the director's rhetorical preachiness, with an implication of humanist coat-trailing. Yet I think this is to misunderstand how individual and unanswerable dreams really are. Kurosawa was himself present at the great earthquake of Tokyo in 1923 (there is a powerful description of the event in his autobiography) and one feels that, whatever has happened subsequently, the anticipation of disaster was from that time etched into his deepest character. Hiroshima and Nagasaki confirmed the phobia, as how should they not? I do not agree that the film is too literal, or even that it 'preaches' a humanist message. It seems to me to arise not out of rational discourse but from the subconscious, where art originates. For all its expensive production values, simplicity of emotion seems to be the keynote—as it was in Shakespeare's last plays.

MARK LE FANU



Yohji Yamamoto.

## THE PERFECT JACKET NOTEBOOK ON CITIES AND CLOTHES

Though Wim Wenders is the personification of fashion, there is little, one would have thought, to suggest any great sartorial interests on his part. In fact, Wenders, as seen in this movie, with his horn-rimmed spectacles and his tight jeans, looks like the kind of time-warp character soon to be featured in cartoon strips. All the more surprising therefore that *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (Artificial Eye) was inspired by the purchase of a jacket and shirt made by the Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto which somehow fitted Wenders more perfectly than any clothes hitherto.

This is not *Paris, Texas* but Paris, Tokyo. The cities which Wenders so brilliantly evokes in his films, most recently and in an extraordinarily premonitory fashion, of course, Berlin, these cities are, despite the title, virtually absent from this film. Where the images of the Berlin Wall in *Wings of Desire* will remain as a telling monument to an epoch in our history, Paris and certainly Tokyo are reduced here to little more than a few establishing shots.

In Tokyo our camera speeds along inside a car driven on a freeway high above the winking lights, but in a location which would be anonymous but for the occasional inscription in Japanese and the fact that the car is on the wrong side of the road for France. Paris is seen very obliquely from the corner of the Pompidou Centre looking down over the café and thence to the crowds below. This may be a convenient vantage point to encompass the city, but the choice of perspective has more to do with the fact that the Pompidou Centre is the film's

patron. *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* is a commission undertaken, on Wenders' own admission, with some reluctance: 'Fashion, I'll have nothing of it', and approached in a deliberately down-beat manner 'like taking a walk, reading a newspaper, eating.'

But Yamamoto is a fascinating character. He is one of the many Japanese designers who now show their clothes in Paris and he therefore typifies in some way the cultural and commercial encounter between Western and Eastern values. Japan has been fashionable in France for at least twenty years now, which is just as well since there seems no other explanation for the success of the stunningly ugly and unflattering clothes which Yamamoto designs for women (for men his tastes are more classic). Is this, one wonders, a kind of revenge for past humiliations? Is it really necessary to dress us in bits of black rag? Is the exaggerated elongation of these forms a compensation for the average height difference between Japanese and Western women?

The creator, the *auteur*, since Wenders makes a not very substantial case for the comparison between fashion designer and film director, talks about his background, about his father whose death in the war he has still not come to terms with and still not forgiven, and his mother who was a dressmaker. He appears physically frail and looks considerably older than the tall, robust, boyish Wenders who is in fact three years older than him. He is much given to quiet contemplation of fold and line, punctuated by sudden darting movements as he swoops to pin or slit or to adjust an armhole or a pleat.

The maestro is surrounded by a team composed exclusively of women who listen attentively to this or that remark, whom he instructs and, occasionally, consults. Towering above this bustling group is the European model, looking even more statuesque than would otherwise be the case because she is at least a head taller than all the Japanese. Fashion, as Yamamoto explains, is a competitive business and once you have broken into the European market you have to stay there. Hence the incongruous juxtaposition of the talent and the money, belied by physical frailty, on the one hand, and the consumer on the other.

Wenders films the preparation for the Paris show intercut with his conversations with Yamamoto round a billiard table or on the roof of the Pompidou Centre, or with shots of the car driving along the freeway over which he has dubbed his thoughts on life and the world. Yamamoto is in the image business and records his show on video. Wenders has attempted to reproduce this image production by mixing film and video media, sometimes to brilliant effect and sometimes less so. Often he places within the film frame a video image caught on a television screen or on Yamamoto's tiny personal monitor, using it either as a repetition of, or as a counterpoint to, the film image. In the freeway shots, indeed, half the frame is taken up with a video image, as it were back-projecting the cityscape so that the viewer has a dizzy uncertainty about which way he is heading.

At other times, Wenders expatiates somewhat pretentiously on what he alleges is the superior realism of the video image and how he found its familiarity more appropriate to this subject. At its best, the combination is as fascinating as Godard's experiments in the same hybrid form. At its worst, we have a cinema screen filled with blown-up images which, due to their lack of definition, give the body's extremities, particularly the hands, an uncanny, skeletal appearance, accentuating Yamamoto's already apparent frailty.

Wenders is right to suggest that there is something homely and domestic about video. But it can also do terrible things to the human body. Indeed, one reason why his record of Nicholas Ray's last days in *Lightning Over Water* was so moving was because the image appeared to disintegrate physically with the man. Here, by contrast, one expects Yamamoto to maintain his consistency precisely because he adds to or clothes the body, and when he too seems to be disintegrating the effect is extremely disturbing.

*Notebook on Cities and Clothes* is a series of jottings with a few features typical of Wenders. As usual in his films, the women are bit players or icons, while the men develop a strange camaraderie. As usual, there is an

almost intolerable degree of linguistic dislocation, provided here by the conversations between a German and a Japanese conducted in English or occasionally French. And as usual, Wenders has an unerring eye for the real points of cultural interaction, so that the clothes are merely a pretext for an essay on the relationship between East and West, between originality and the endless reproduction made possible by electronic media, and between film and video.

JILL FORBES

## GRAND TOUR TORRENTS OF SPRING

Jerzy Skolimowski knew and loved Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring* from his schooldays in Poland during the Stalinist years. It was one of the few pieces of classical literature they were allowed to read and he had long wanted to film it. He finally got his chance two years ago through the Italian producer Angelo Rizzoli and shot it in Rome, Venice and Prague, with Czechoslovakia standing in for Germany, where much of the action is set.

Turgenev's novella presents many problems of adaptation. Its story—of a young aristocrat's sentimental education at the hands of two women, an Italian pastrycook's daughter from Mainz and a Russian woman of the world taking the waters in Wiesbaden—falls inconveniently into two halves. Once Dimitri Sanin resolves to sell his estate and falls under the spell of the prospective purchaser, the magnetic Maria Nikolaevna, his engagement to Gemma Rosselli is largely forgotten. That, of course, is Turgenev's point, but it's a literary one that would not work in dramatic terms. A film in two parts always seems broken-backed.

Skolimowski's solution is inspired. He takes the duel scene—in the novel one of the most poorly integrated incidents—and remotivates it so as to provide a bridge between the two romances. In Turgenev, the quarrel between Sanin and Von Doenhoft blows up out of an arbitrary act of boorishness when Von Doenhoft flirts with Gemma and seizes a rose as a souvenir. In Skolimowski's version (Curzon), Sanin has given Gemma the rose and it is Maria Nikolaevna who orders Von Doenhoft to bring it to her as a token of his loyalty. It's a small change, but it serves to lead the narrative into a new path, defines the character of Maria Nikolaevna at her first appearance and makes the Von Doenhoft subplot (which in the novel peters out without issue) the very fulcrum of the tale.

There is an equally brilliant invention near the end. In the novel the two women never meet. Skolimowski, however, allows Maria Nikolaevna the

exquisite torture of inviting Sanin and Gemma to dinner. She aims to humiliate Gemma, to expose her provincial soul by chattering in French which she knows Gemma will not understand and (the ultimate *coup de foudre*) permit her to discover the lovers locked in an embrace. As skilfully as in the duel scene, this sequence welds the two strains of the story together just when it seemed they were drifting irreconcilably apart.

Some of Skolimowski's other changes to the novel add a fresh dimension to it. Turgenev tells us only that Maria Nikolaevna is in Wiesbaden for the waters. In the film, an aside, overheard at the opera, implies that she is there because she is terminally sick ('the brightness, you know, is not a sign of health'). This puts a new and more compassionate complexion on her behaviour. She is callous and emotionally flighty because she knows that life will not deal her another hand. And, indeed, we learn at the end that she has died not, as Turgenev has it, 'years ago', but the very next year.

Less successful is the gypsy wedding sequence, absent in Turgenev, that Skolimowski interpolates as a prelude to the love scene between Sanin and Maria Nikolaevna. It smacks simply of local colour, whereas the fairground scene is superbly orchestrated to bounce one theme off another, delineate character and provide a spectacular metaphor for youthful infatuation in the shape of a hot-air balloon that nevertheless is firmly tied to the ground by tow ropes. So much for Gemma's dreams of love untrammeled.

*Torrents*: Nastassja Kinski, William Forsythe, Timothy Hutton, Valeria Golino.



The balloon is echoed at the start of the Venetian scene that closes the story proper. But this time it's free-floating—like an emblem of Maria Nikolaevna's untamed spirit skittering among the carnival revellers while Sanin, clad in clownish motley, strives vainly to pin her down. This scene picks up the operatic flavour that recurs throughout the film, as it does in Turgenev's novel (written, some say, under the sign of Pauline Viardot, the singer with whom the author was romantically involved). When the lovers attend the opera in Wiesbaden, it is, ironically, to hear *Don Giovanni*. What we see is the death of the Commendatore in the duelling scene, a fate that Sanin nearly suffered from Von Doenhoft. And the last words of the Venetian scene ('la commedia è finita') echo the close of *I Pagliacci*, introducing a commedia dell'arte element redolent of a certain strain in Italian opera of the time.

The Venetian scene, which reprises the main motifs of the story—the shadow of a duelling pistol, a gypsy dance, the white stallion on which the lovers rode to their tryst—is surrealist in tone, perfectly matching the film's haunting 'bookend' shots of the silhouette of a coach and horses being ferried across the Venetian lagoon.

With its rich period detail (even down to the chamber pots being emptied in the streets in the morning), the film turns out rather like *Dark Eyes*, another attempt to filter Russian literature through the warmth of Italian eyes. For although Skolimowski brings a Central European flavour to Turgenev, the film feels noticeably

Italianate—in production design, in camerawork (shared between Dante Spinotti and Witold Sobocinski) and in the players, including Valeria Golino as Gemma and Urbano Barberini as a splendidly haughty Von Doenhoef.

The polyglot cast, however, proves something of a mixed blessing. Though Timothy Hutton makes a surprisingly effective Russian aristocrat, neither

Golino nor Nastassja Kinski, as Maria Nikolaevna, has the measure of the nineteenth century. They never look other than modern girls in fancy dress. And the dubbing and post-synching are some of the sloppiest in quite a while. A pity, because they take the edge off an otherwise distinguished entry in the lists of Russian literary adaptation.

ALAN STANBROOK



*Crimes and Misdemeanors:* Anjelica Huston (mistress), Martin Landau (husband) . . .

## WOODY'S WARS CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS

The Woody Allen oeuvre as a whole—developing, at its steady film-a-year pace, into the most fascinating in American cinema—is divided into three parts. There are those films in which Allen himself features, such a compulsive source of self-denigrating one-liners that the films easily disappear into one-joke black holes like *Zelig*. Then there are those films in which he doesn't appear, where the worries about the meaninglessness of existence, the terrors of non-existence, are dispersed among an all-star art-house cast, who make high drama out of these previously comic phobias. And finally there are those works, initially *Hannah and Her Sisters* and now *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Rank), which contain both a film with and one without Woody Allen.

The relationship between the two is bound to be uneasy—Woody in his part of the film trying to wisecrack himself and his anxieties off the screen, while in the other he creates an unembarrassed theatrical space for his characters' *Welt-schmerz*. In the one, afraid of being thought self-important, he is always trying to puncture pretension; in the other, afraid of not being thought serious, he is always trying to locate the

fears of modern consciousness. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is clearly raising the stakes over *Hannah* in this respect. Where the latter worried about love and commitment, the puzzling vagaries of the human heart, *Crimes* goes for life and death, a man's relationship to his God. Where *Hannah* nodded to Chekhov, *Crimes* takes its title from Dostoevsky, the loss of 'punishment' being both the self-denigrating joke this time around (in a modern, relativistic world it's always possible to pleabargain for a lesser offence, a misdemeanour) and the heart of the moral matter.

The protagonist of this side of the film is Dr Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), respected ophthalmologist, upstanding citizen, loving family man and cultured individual, who is driven to instigate a murder. By a series of steps he doesn't think about while he is taking them, he agrees that his mistress of two years (Anjelica Huston), who is now refusing to accept a tucked-away non-existence, can only be dealt with via a final solution. Judah has a convenient black-sheep brother who so deals with her, but he also has a religious Jewish upbringing whose pre-

cepts about absolute justice and an all-seeing God increasingly haunt him. His shock is to discover, not only that a lightning bolt fails to strike him, but he doesn't even feel bad forever. That the most awful things can be done and lived with.

On the other side is Clifford Stern (Allen), an aspiring film-maker whose honourable mention at the Cincinnati Documentary Film Festival, and his earnest commitment to Real Values, cut little ice with his wife or his TV producer brother-in-law Lester (Alan Alda). The latter is the primary representative of the world of false values, a fount of pseudo-profound formulas ('Comedy is tragedy—plus time'), non-stop ideas for new series (which he dictates into a pocket recorder), and so impervious to Clifford's scorn that he even offers him the job of directing a TV feature about himself ('a creative mind at work'). This at least introduces Clifford to soul mate Halley Reed (Mia Farrow), associate producer of the show, who tells him that the creative mind she really wanted to document was Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In return, Clifford shows her his uncompleted film about an unregarded sage for our time, Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann), who has genuinely profound things to say about the human condition.

To the extent that Judah and Clifford's stories work as separate, self-contained essays on the theme of moral choices and consequences, both remain naggingly unsatisfying. In the first case, this has to do with Allen's weakness as a straight dramatist, and in the second with his self-indulgence as a comic. Judah's scenes with his mistress, their wrangling in the present with occasional flashbacks to happier days, outline the dilemma without giving it much substance, even being (despite a generally fine performance by Landau) off-key in the higher dramatic reaches. Similarly, all the play on eyes—God's, Judah's, even those of another brother-in-law of Clifford's, Ben (Sam

... and Claire Bloom (wife).



Waterston), who is going blind but has the firmest moral convictions of anyone in the film—seems like the kind of pseudo-profound motif one might find in one of Lester's shows. The snugness of Judah's plight becomes a snugness in the case of Clifford, as he and Halley engage in self-congratulatory banter about Garcia Marquez or Professor Levy, or discover that they share that other enthusiasm of the 'authentic' soul, a love of old movies.

When these two stories cross each other, however, something else comes into play. Although Judah and Clifford don't meet until the film's final scene (the wedding of Ben's daughter), Allen uses clips from the movies Clifford watches to cut occasionally between them. The clips might be rather obvious jokes about Judah's problems, either marital (*Mr and Mrs Smith*) or murderous (*Happy Go Lucky*), except that Clifford's comment at one point,

'This sort of thing only happens in the movies', works as a more complex irony, an acknowledgment even of his intellectual snugness.

The perfection he finds in cinema, the satisfaction of art, makes him not merely a sympathetic nebbisch, too sensitive ever to succeed, but an escapist—like the heroine of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, or like Judah himself, who admits he was living in a dream world until he stumbled into his current mess. The 'doubling' of Judah and Clifford's stories gives the film a different theme— incompleteness is all, the incompleteness of moral systems, of art, even of one's sense of personal guilt. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* itself becomes incomplete—self-contradictory, ramshackle, often strangely adrift. But through it Allen finds a way forward from such 'perfectly' achieved, self-cancelling conceits as *Zelig*.

RICHARD COMBS

'Rape of Poland', the headlines shrill; sirens blare in practice runs; blackout wardens tend officially to their business; and 'the phony war' proves a singularly apt correlative for the phony dreams of a man precariously poised between action and inaction, courage and cowardice, and any one of several possible selves.

At the same time, Pirie cunningly develops his script within a historical perspective on the genre. As the first part begins, we are in darker Hitchcock territory: a deserted courtyard, a mysterious hand reaches for a milk bottle, a cat dies; the disbelieving Desmond realises he has narrowly escaped death by caustic soda with his cornflakes; cut to a dotty extravaganza, fund-raising for an animal shelter patronised by his titled aunt, at which his tale of attempted mayhem is absently pooh-poohed. The mood darkens, growing ever more mysterious, through his encounter with the enigmatic Anna Raven (Suzanna Hamilton), her running hot-and-cold passions which lead him obliquely to murder, and his panicky flight with the diary into kidnap, torture and the threat of worse to come.

Crucially, Desmond is lured into the clutches of the suave villain Foster (James Fox) at a film studio. 'Do you realise,' Foster enthuses, recalling that Hitchcock shot *The Thirty-Nine Steps* there, 'the Scottish Highlands were stretched out in front of us, right in the middle of Shepherd's Bush?' Instantly—or almost, since an interlude has Foster skipping stones in the Thames to a childish chant ('Bristol, London, Bradford, Glasgow, Nottingham . . . oh, carnage and destruction rain down')—hinting at the enormity of his vision—the tone switches from dark Hitchcock to light.

His ingenuity stimulated by desperation, Desmond escapes from his captors, and begins to retrace Richard Hannay's adventure on the moors, complete with hilarious variation on the crofter's cottage ('It's safe,' he reassures the frightened occupant, 'I belong to the Junior Carlton, I play squash, hunt, travel first class, and I've stayed at Brown's Hotel'). Alas for illusions of heroism, Foster simply gathers him into his clutches again: 'Nice if it were all so simple . . . the world of Richard Hannay, safe and sound.'

The last third of Desmond's ordeal, in effect a battle of wills and wits with Foster, is for him a kind of descent into hell ('You don't believe in hell, do you?' Foster taunts. 'Oh, come on. You don't believe in hell, or doing your bit, or even in . . . what do you call it? . . . free love among equals'). If Desmond finally wins the day, as Hannay would, it is only because, arriving simultaneously at the end of his tether and of his invention, he for once tells the whole truth, and in so doing discovers himself. And promptly seeks refuge from dreams

## FANTASISTS

### NEVER COME BACK and THE LORELEI

Within the space of four evenings in March—a profligacy in programming, as Lady Bracknell might have remarked, that smacks as much of carelessness as the loss of both one's parents—the BBC produced not just one, but two outstanding thrillers. Or, to be more precise, one complete film, *The Lorelei*, and the first episode in David Pirie's three-part serialisation of John Mair's novel *Never Come Back*.

Published in 1941, shortly before the author was killed in an RAF training accident, Mair's only novel is something of a transitional thriller, sometimes clumsy, more often intriguing in its attempt to haul the traditional British hero into the twentieth century. A vaguely disgruntled journalist, Mair's Desmond Thane is more concerned with pursuing women and his own ends than with contributing to the war effort. A compulsive liar and mythomaniac, he is already fantasising the murder of a woman who has disappointed him when circumstances conspire to make him kill her, leaving him vaguely exhilarated, vaguely frightened, and vaguely surprised to find murder coming naturally when a second occasion looms. On the run to save his own precious skin, pursued by members of a ruthless international conspiracy who are after a coded diary in his possession, he eventually contrives—partly through his facility at inventing scams, partly through the fantasy of glory that beckons—to turn up trumps.

The problem is that the character Mair depicts is less an anti-hero than a dangerous psycho, with the result that the novel never quite finds a proper balance. David Pirie's adaptation solves this by making the period in which the

book was written a central character. The first words we hear from Desmond Thane (Nathaniel Parker), aside from a greeting to his cat, are redolent of impatient disillusionment. 'Whore by name, whore by nature,' he sneers as the radio announces a repeat broadcast of Sir Samuel Hoare's speech on the need for fortitude in 'this war of nerves'.

*Never Come Back:*  
Suzanna Hamilton (Anna Raven).



of glory within the anonymity of the army.

Beautifully paced by Ben Bolt's direction (which cleverly evades the threat of stasis in the third episode), garnished by Pirie with evocative dialogue and an unusually resonant McGuffin (not so much the diary as a photograph of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in the company of Adolf Hitler: a prop in Desmond's journalistic chore of churning out True Romances, but also a clue to the breathtaking scope of this conspiracy by fascist sympathisers), *Never Come Back* is a magnificently entertaining thriller, intelligently old-fashioned in the very best sense.

*The Lorelei*, by contrast, written (Nick Dunning) and directed (Terry Johnson) with seamless perfection, is resolutely *nouveau*. It has a beginning, a middle and an end all right, but leaves you pleasantly wondering which you have been watching at any particular moment in its elusive, more or less circular course. Kate (Amanda Redman), a young London teacher holidaying alone in the wilds of Wales, has an unnerving experience at the eminently respectable B&B where she spends the night. As the proprietor comes upstairs to deliver the sandwiches, there is a knock at the door; a sinisterly dishevelled stranger with

cracked spectacles pokes his head in; 'Oh, my God!' he mutters in tones of horror; and vanishes as though he had never existed.

The name 'Lorelei' attached to the boarding-house suggests that it may be the siren singing its song of enticement and destruction. Or perhaps the call lies in the very remoteness of the village, with its landscape of hills strewn with rocks suggestive of sacrificial stones, its pub over which silence suddenly descends as Kate enters, its dark lanes in which she is scared out of her wits by the mocking banshee cry of an overtaking cyclist. But when Kate returns to London, spots the mysterious stranger in the street, and confronts him accusingly, she begins to make the role of the Lorelei her own.

Plausibly pleading his innocence, the stranger turns out to be Tony (Michael Maloney), a new supply teacher at her school; Kate, lonely but sexually wary, embarks on a hesitant affair with him; and on a weekend trip to Wales together, during which her residual fears resurface, she tries to confront her 'premonition' by making Tony re-enact it. After several uncomprehending rehearsals, Tony duly knocks, looks in, mutters 'Oh, my God!', and—obedient to her urgent stage directions—vanishes.

The theatrical terminology is by no

means accidental, since—in the elaborate system of correspondences, sometimes sinister, sometimes hilarious, which structure the very serious game Dunning and Johnson are playing—Kate's attempt to stage manage her emotions is tangentially mirrored by Tony's fraught efforts to direct a school production of *The Insect Play*. Echoing back and forth between Wales and London, Kate's fears are alternately mocked (the moths burning and drowning as she tries to enjoy a candlelit bath are no more alarming than kids costumed as dragonflies and dung-beetles) and upheld (flames do singe, as she discovers when straying near a gas-jet while demonstrating a pair of costume wings).

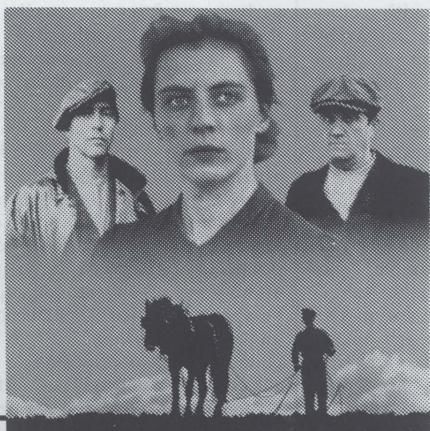
Every image in the film, in a playful but astonishingly intricate tapestry, contributes to the comprehensive analysis of Kate's emotional disarray. Trust and sexual confidence come too late for her. Returning to Wales to confront her nightmare, she finally exorcises it, but at the cost of also exorcising the lover she couldn't bring herself to trust. Irreducible to either supernatural or psychological interpretations, *The Lorelei* claims the best of both worlds; delightfully sinister, wittily perceptive, and absolutely all of a piece, it's a small gem.

TOM MILNE

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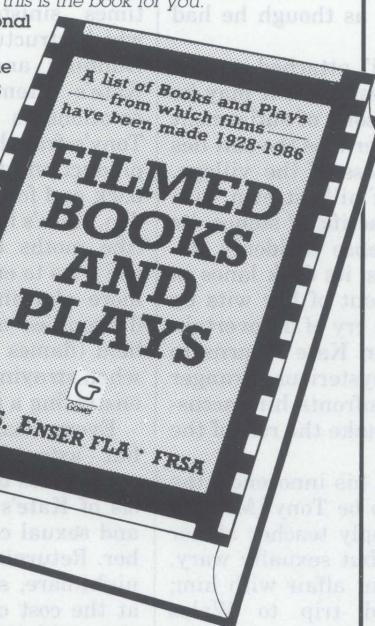
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## BOOK REVIEWS

### GIVING A DAMN

#### THE DAME IN THE KIMONO Hollywood, Censorship and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s

by Leonard J. Leff, Jerold L. Simmons and Weidenfeld and Nicolson/£17.50

D.W. Griffith saw it coming. 'Let the American people stand in fear and trembling,' he warned in 1916, foreseeing the day, 'when censors, under the shadow of the American flag of independence, will be empowered... to foist their individual whims, hobbies or prejudices on the suffering public.'

And so they were. By 1921, the year of the Arbuckle scandal, local movie censorship boards right across the States were snipping away with unbounded zeal. In that year alone, as Leff and Simmons note in *The Dame in the Kimono*, near on a hundred film censorship bills were introduced in 37 states, all with wildly different provisions. In Kansas no woman could be shown smoking; on-screen pregnancy was taboo in Pennsylvania. Small details like continuity, pacing and dramatic logic went—literally—by the board. Morality, or what passed for it, was all.

The studios, hoping to preempt the process and retain some control over it, chose self-censorship as the lesser evil, and set up the Motion Picture Association of America, with ex-Postmaster General Will Hays in charge. Hays, in his turn, introduced the code which always thereafter bore his name, setting out what was and was not acceptable. Making it stick was another matter. Sex sold seats, as producers well knew, and Hays found himself being given the runaround by everybody from Howard Hughes to Betty Boop.

Two factors gave the Code teeth, and both were Catholic. One was Joe Breen, whom Hays appointed head of the Production Code Administration (PCA): a shrewd Irishman with close links to the Church hierarchy and a sound grasp of how movies, and the movie business, worked. The other, which lent Breen the clout he needed, was the Legion of Decency.

The Legion was the creation of the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures, a group of bishops and influential laymen. Legion members—said to number some 8 million—took a pledge to 'remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality.' Hollywood, faced with the prospect of mass boycotts, capitulated. After 1934, the year

of the Legion's inauguration, the Code was—more or less—observed.

Though *Film Weekly* called him the 'Hitler of Hollywood' (with Hays, his nominal boss, 'a mere Hindenburg'), Breen's methods were rarely dictatorial. A born negotiator, he relished the horse-trading on fine details of script and footage, dickering happily for months over some minor profanity. On *Gone With the Wind*, the debate between Breen and Selznick (with Val Lewton as chief go-between) ran almost three years. Gable's classic exit line, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn,' became a key point at issue. Breen finally passed it in return for the axing of a 'For God's Sake' and some toning down of the 'husbandly rape' scene.

The Breen régime was the heyday of the PCA. By the time he stepped down in 1954, handing over to his deputy, the urbane, English-born Geoff Shurlock, its power (and that of the Legion) was fading, weakened by shifting mores and by attrition from postwar filmmakers such as Preminger and Kazan. Within a few years of Breen's departure, the tribunal that had jibbed at the odd 'damn' was solemnly debating how much fellatio was permissible on-screen.

To tell their story, Leff and Simmons have chosen to concentrate on eleven 'tough cases'—films such as *Dead End* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *Lolita*, which defined, or redefined, the stance of the PCA. Though this approach makes for a clear narrative focus, it also gives the impression that most of the Administration's business was conducted at a fairly elevated level, with concerns of propriety pitched against those of high art and grave moral purpose. A case history or two from nearer the sleazeball end of the market might have been instructive.

That apart, the only serious fault of *The Dame in the Kimono* is an oddly schizoid writing style which it's tempting—though perhaps unfair—to ascribe to the book's dual authorship. The early chapters, in particular, lapse now and again into a corny you-are-there mode: 'Breen doused the lights and looked around. Even in shadow the Production Code office on Hollywood Boulevard resembled that of a third-rate Sam Spade...' We're also treated to periodic outbreaks of *Variety*-style jargon, often verging on the incomprehensible, in which people become 'mavens' and 'solons', or 'tab the papal message a valentine'.

Luckily, it doesn't last. After about a hundred pages the prose spits out its chewing gum, and

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settles down to being colloquial, readable and witty. *The Dame in the Kimono* (the title, incidentally, comes from a scene excised from the 1931 *Maltese Falcon*) brings alive, without resorting to easy ridicule, the moral cruxes of yesteryear. It also, rather unexpectedly, serves to increase our respect for the members of the PCA. In itself, the Production Code was crass, bigoted and simplistic. But since, at that juncture of American movie history, something like it was probably inevitable, those who administered it did so with rather more intelligence and sensitivity than it deserved.

PHILIP KEMP

### JOHN'S FAMILY

#### THE HUSTONS

by Lawrence Grobel  
Bloomsbury/£20

Walter Huston was a reliable all-purpose actor. He originated the role of Sinclair Lewis's Dods-worth on Broadway and by making this complex businessman simple, even innocent, assured the play's immense popularity. The same year, 1934, he took a stab at Othello, but despite a lavish production and meticulous preparation with markedly less success. Stanislavski, however, thought him the greatest American actor. He was a professional to his fingertips. During the writing of *Knickerbocker Holiday*, a satirical musical about Peter Stuyvesant, Lawrence Grobel records, Josh Logan reprised down the telephone to his star Kurt Weill's thickly accented rendition of a song they had just composed. 'Play the tune again,' Walter said, and then sang back 'September Song'. Logan was dumbfounded. 'I never met an actor as good as Walter in my life.'

If Walter Huston is remembered today, however, it is probably as the extraordinary old man, dancing and removing his false teeth and effortlessly upstaging Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. He appeared in several of his son John's other pictures, and their relationship was in some respects that of joshing brothers. Walter played a 'good luck' cameo in *The Maltese Falcon*, the wounded ship's captain who staggers into Sam Spade's office and falls dead. John put him through the hoops unmercifully, take followed take, and next day the director had Mary Astor ring up Walter with the news that the lab had ruined the negative...

Lawrence Grobel's absorbing saga of the Huston clan touches, too, on the beginning film careers of John's sons Tony and

Danny and the more rounded, individual work of his actress daughter Anjelica. These careers, like Walter's, were also bound up to a significant extent with John's. One of the book's best passages is an account of the making of John Huston's last film, *The Dead*, scripted by Tony and starring Anjelica, an adaptation of the Joyce story in which the futility of human endeavour, in this case a man's discovery that he knows nothing of his wife, is rendered with near-perfect economy. What was once known in Hollywood as the 'Huston ending'—a mixed group of adventurers on a chimerical quest which ends in disappointment—finds an oblique and fitting resolution in *The Dead*.

The outline of John Huston's life (or rather lives, as a boxer, artist, horseman, collector) is well documented. Huston himself delivered one account in *An Open Book*. Grobel, however, has provided the footnotes. His list of witnesses, a number of them women romantically linked to John who have on occasion to delve deep to remember their brief encounters, is exhaustive, not too say exhausting and at times rather smoothed-out and anonymous. The book grew out of a profile of John Huston which the author undertook for *Playboy*. His method has been to allow the witnesses to speak for themselves. It is the contemporary reviewers, on the whole, who pass judgment on the films.

*The Hustons* is, however, filled with nuggets: from Walter's rule of thumb that an actor should never pause before a full-stop; through the revelation that Bogart, not Huston, came up with the line (referring to the Falcon) 'the stuff that dreams are made of'; to John's qualities as a director, his hypnotic attentiveness, his ease with actors which shows even in his less successful pictures. 'Even though my part was a minor one,' Marilyn Monroe said of her role in *The Asphalt Jungle*, 'I felt as if I were the most important performer in the picture—when I was before the camera.'

Grobel does not gloss over or make too much of the dark streak in John's character. His capacity for self-defeating violence is encapsulated in one episode in which he publicly struck one of his wives (she had failed to place a winning bet) and then, to calm himself down, went out and rode a horse full tilt into a closed gate, killing the creature. On the whole, though, the John Huston who emerges from these pages is a man of great if somewhat monstrous charm, impossible to ignore and, as many testify, impossible to forget.

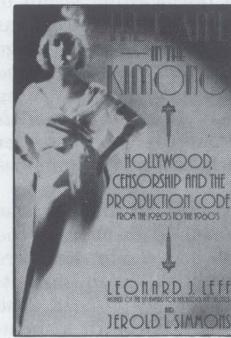
JOHN PYM

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## THE RIGHT TO KNOW

### DEATH ON THE ROCK AND OTHER STORIES

by Roger Bolton

W. H. Allen/Optomen/£12.95

Like Michael Cockerell's *Sources Close to the Prime Minister* and *Live from No 10, Death on the Rock and Other Stories* offers a remarkably perceptive, lucid and well-informed broadcaster's eye view of the relationship between television and politics over the last twenty years. Bolton's career in broadcasting began in 1967 when he joined the BBC as a general trainee. He was to go on to edit *Tonight*, *Panorama* and *Nationwide*, before joining Thames in 1986 to edit *This Week*, becoming their Controller of Network Factual Programmes last year.

During this period he was directly involved in many of the major rows between broadcasters and the political establishment: *The Question of Ulster*, the *Tonight* interview with a member of the INLA in the wake of Airey Neave's killing, the never-completed *Panorama* which was to have included a brief sequence of the IRA setting up a road check in Carrickmore and which led to Bolton's (temporary) sacking

and, of course, *Death on the Rock* itself.

Northern Ireland dominates this book, just as it has dominated the increasingly troubled relationship between broadcasters and politicians. What strikes one most forcibly after reading this catalogue of conflicts is the chasm separating broadcasters' and politicians' definitions of the journalist's role. The Westminster view comes across at its bluntest in an unattributed quote from one of Mrs Thatcher's 'closest advisers': 'The media have got to decide, not to put too fine a point on it, whether they are going to join the human race or not, whether they are part of society or whether they stand outside and do what the hell they like . . . You have to be a citizen first and a journalist second.'

Given the apparent prevalence of such views at Westminster, Douglas Hurd's October 1988 ban on broadcast interviews with members of Sinn Fein, etc., seems, in retrospect, inevitable. Perhaps the only surprise is that someone didn't introduce it earlier. Bolton himself ponders the vexed question of interviewing terrorists and concludes: 'The public has a right to know what is happening in Northern Ireland, and what motivates those

involved, including the paramilitaries. Such interviews should be rare, thorough and carefully placed in context, but they should be done . . . If the interviewer is thorough and determined (and an interviewer would be an idiot if he or she wasn't in these circumstances), then the usual result of these interviews is to reveal the true nature of the interviewee and his activities.'

It would probably be naive to expect politicians to change their attitude to television journalism. What is more disturbing is the gulf that now seems to exist between broadcast and print journalists' conception of their role in a democratic society. Bolton states his own credo quite straightforwardly. Of the INLA furore, he notes: 'I didn't want the initiative and independence of my team stifled by self-censorship, and I had an overwhelming, perhaps obsessive, belief in the importance of the Northern Ireland question and the special nature of BBC journalism. We were set up to be independent of commercial and political pressures, to set standards, to tell the truth . . . I thought the BBC was different from other organisations. Its journalism was dedicated to discovering the facts, to telling the truth fearlessly. Corporate self-interest wasn't involved, was it?' Nothing very exceptional here, and commentators who have complained of a rather self-righteous tone are clearly deaf to irony and a certain self-mockery.

However, given the vituperation heaped on many of Bolton's programmes by the press, culminating in the notorious *Sunday Times* 'Insight' campaign against *Death on the Rock*, one can only assume that most newspapers now operate with a different set of criteria. The trouble begins early on, with the *Daily Telegraph* stating, apropos *The Question of Ulster*, 'It is scarcely surprising that some Ministers and Conservative MPs believe there are no limits to the irresponsibility of the Corporation', and reaches fever pitch over Carrickmore: 'Field Day for IRA Thugs' (*Daily Star*), 'Close to Treason' (*Daily Express*), 'a perverted exercise in journalistic enterprise' (*Daily Telegraph*), while the ever reliable *Daily Mail* claimed, not for the first or last time, that 'inside the Television Centre there exists a small but efficient and dedicated cabal of Left-wing extremists who, by twisting the picture out of focus, are guilty of projecting propaganda.' And so on, until the veritable climax of *Death on the Rock* (at which point, it should be added, a more circumspect and sceptical *Telegraph* largely

detached itself from the rest of the pack).

But whatever the papers may have said about the broadcasters, the ethics of the press do not emerge unscathed from Bolton's book. There is the tabloid reporter in Gibraltar who admitted that, 'it doesn't matter what we write, our editors will change it.' There is the reporter who, when asked why his paper was claiming that the alleged 'Fourth Man' on the Rock was Evelyn Glenholmes, replied, 'because we have a nice picture of her and she won't sue.'

And there is the internal memo from Rosie Waterhouse to Focus editor Robin Morgan. The way the *Sunday Times* had presented the *Death on the Rock* story, she claimed, left the paper 'wide open to accusations that we had set out to prove one point of view and . . . misquoted interviews to fit—the very accusations we were leveling at Thames. You were not interested in any information I obtained which contradicted your apparent premise—that the Thames documentary was wrong, and the official version was right.'

JULIAN PETLEY

## QUESTIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

### FILM AND REFORM John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement

by Ian Aitken  
Routledge/£30

He was more concerned with the representation of fish than with the representation of a labour process.' Thus the American critic Harry A. Potamkin, writing in 1930 of Grierson's *Drifters*. Is there anything more to be said about Grierson and the British documentary movement? Ian Aitken thinks there is, and has written a book which sets out to challenge the multifarious accounts of Grierson on the ground that they fail to take account of his intellectual formation.

In *Drifters*, then, 'the subordination of naturalistic verisimilitude to symbolic expression . . . was a product of the influence of idealist thought, and of the idealist distinction between the real and the phenomenal.' The essence of the fish, in other words, rather than their appearance. Or what Grierson himself referred to as the 'really real', by which he meant a 'reality' or a 'truth' which exists at a level of abstraction beyond empirical observation. Ian Aitken's book, published in Routledge's scatter-shot 'Cinema and Society' series, roots this notion in what he

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# BOOK REVIEWS

argues was the abiding influence on Grierson of philosophical idealism. The book aims, in so far as a coherent objective is detectable, to demonstrate that Grierson's world view, and by extension his idea of documentary, 'can be defined as a neo-kantian social democratic version of Bradley's absolute idealist philosophy'.

A mouthful of ideas. To which, moreover, is added the parallel objective of an investigation of the relations between the documentary film movement and social democratic reformism in Britain between the wars; and a potted cultural history of the 30s. Aitken's ambition is admirable, in times of narrow textual analyses which ignore the context that produced those texts. It is also, clearly, self-defeating. What sets out as an intellectual biography of Grierson wanders into so many disorienting byways of cultural history that long before the end the book has lost its way.

The fault lies, not without irony, in Aitken's increasingly breathless attempts to extract larger ideas from a mass of empirical observations. His chapters on the documentary movement itself—the work of the Grierson film units at the Empire Marketing Board and the Post Office, the offshoot Strand and Realist units—are a rush through familiar territory and a list of titles. *Night Mail* is treated in a few lines; *Housing Problems* as a passing illustration of the move from state to corporate sponsorship. Rotha's (surely well attested) partisan view of the movement is taken on trust. Grierson's own criticism of Jennings' *Spare Time* as patronising of working-class culture was 'misdirected' because the film 'ranks with the best in the documentary movement'. Q.E.D.

Except that these are contentious areas of direct relevance to Aitken's general argument about the gulf between Grierson's original idea of socially purposive film-making and the films themselves. Ranking the documentary movement films as more or less 'significant'—a severely overused word in this book—Aitken stumbles to a limp conclusion that Grierson's model of the relationship between documentary and the state, derived from a background of idealist philosophy, was unrealistic and utopian.

Aitken argues that during the interwar period in Britain 'the establishment attempted to re-establish the more hierarchical society which had existed before the [First] war.' From any political perspective this is a gross oversimplification, begging a number of questions which are

here only cursorily examined. Instead, the book wanders into detours such as a chapter on the rise of corporate capitalism after 1870 and the concomitant development of the public relations industry, where we learn that during a coal-mining dispute in 1906 the Pennsylvania anthracite industry hired a Mr Ivy Lee as Public Relations Consultant. The disadvantage of this all-inclusive approach is only too evident in a chapter in which Aitken attempts to connect the roots of British documentary cinema to a cultural history which invokes, among a teeming multitude of references, such 'documentary' fiction as Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (!).

Far more persuasive is the first half of the book, which provides a commendably detailed account of Grierson's intellectually formative years—the influence of his schoolteacher parents, the academic stimulus of Glasgow University, the Scottish legacy of economic liberalism and the dying but still glowing embers of Calvinism. There is a determinist slant to Aitken's insistence that Grierson's interest in idealist philosophy helped form the conceptual core of what later became his theory of documentary film. But the many quotations from Grierson's own early writings indicate that there is at least some truth in this.

Aitken links this notion to Grierson's political ideas, which he characterises as 'social democratic constitutional reformism'. He dispels the myth that Grierson was actively involved in the politics of Red Clydeside. And he offers an informative account of Grierson's two years in America, his encounter with Chicago sociology, his study of the 'yellow press', and his research into the audience reaction files at Famous Players Lasky which was the spur to his interest in cinema.

It is when the book begins to apply its account of Grierson's philosophical and political ideas to the documentary movement itself that it begins to falter. It signals lack of a guiding editorial hand, which might have excised its repetitions and steered its argument on a more coherent course. And might also have queried the need for more than a thousand footnotes, which litter the pages like windblown confetti—a pedant's dream, but a reader's nightmare. As it is, the book is sloppily edited and poorly printed. And at £30 it is extortiously priced, effectively putting it beyond the reach of the students whose interest the publishers appeal to.

DAVID WILSON

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# LETTERS

## Mister Johnson

SIR,—I was most interested to read John Pym's article on *Mister Johnson* (Spring 1990), as I have worked in Nigeria and have good friends there. The article rightly comments that, before *Mister Johnson*, no independent Western company had chosen Nigeria for a location. Perhaps this is as well, because such enterprises do not usually portray the real Africa in terms of its cultural riches, but merely use it as a background for a Western-style drama and main cast.

Bruce Beresford clearly has a real opportunity to redress this, with his Nigerian background and his achievement with *Driving Miss Daisy*. Whether Joyce Cary's tale does justice to African culture is another matter. Of course, what one longs for in Nigeria is an inspired Ousmane Sembène supported by a cadre of indigenous technicians whose product will stand up beyond the borders of Nigeria.

I have not seen any of Chief Hubert Ogunde's films, which I gather are made primarily for Nigerian distribution. It is not wholly true, however, to say that 'nobody has made a feature film in Nigeria but him', a fact which the BFI's archives should be able to verify. I know this because I was in Nigeria from February to May 1956, involved in the production of *Freedom*, an Eastman-colour feature, processed at Denham and shown at the 1957 Berlin Film Festival.

This was the first feature film made in Nigeria, and it had a number of interesting attributes. It was scripted and created by three Africans: Ifogha Amata (President of the Student Union, Ibadan University, Nigeria); Manasseh Moerane (Vice-President, African Teachers Association, Johannesburg); and Dr Karbo from Ghana. The leading parts were played by non-professional Africans and one European. The technical crew came from seven countries. The cameraman was Swedish, under contract to Disney, but released temporarily for the assignment.

Josh Billings wrote of the film in the *Kinematograph Weekly*: 'The backgrounds shot in Nigeria are wonderful and the music impressive. Urgent subject, honest and straightforward treatment, fine acting by African team, authentic settings, sly humorous touches, memorable climax.' After its premiere at the Egyptian Theatre, Hollywood, Jesse Lasky, one-time head of Paramount, commented, 'The impact of *Freedom* is terrific. Only those of us in the industry know what has been achieved.'

It was banned as subversive in Uganda, but got a showing in South Africa. Jomo Kenyatta,

after seeing the film, and in order to prevent tribal bloodshed, requested its dubbing into Swahili and screening throughout Kenya before the first democratic elections, following the declaration of independence. It has gone into seven languages since and is still in demand.

Yours faithfully,  
PETER SISAM  
Marlow, Bucks

## Ray

SIR,—I welcome David Wilson's review of my biography of Satyajit Ray (Spring 1990), but feel it is worth taking issue with his comment that I am indulging in 'special pleading' for Ray's oeuvre when I write at the very end of the book that Ray has experimented with subject matter and style—surely more than any other director in cinema'.

Which other world-class director has examined literally all strata of his society, in the past, present and 'future' (remembering Ray's fantasy films)? And in doing so has created moods that range from high tragedy (*The Home and the World*) to near-farce (*The Philosopher's Stone*), not to mention some fine detective stories and documentaries?

Renoir and Kurosawa seem to be his only serious rivals in this respect, but neither, so far as I know, has made a real musical (as Ray did in *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha* and its sequel); nor has either maintained such a consistently high standard as Ray—which Kurosawa himself graciously acknowledges.

Yours faithfully,  
ANDREW ROBINSON  
London N1

## Napoleon

SIR,—Film books are seldom treated with any flair by the publicity departments of publishers, so I was not surprised when the English translation of the Abel Gance script of *Napoleon* was sneaked on to the market recently, so surreptitiously one might have imagined it was under the Official Secrets Act.

Since it is almost twenty-five years since Lorrimer Press first commissioned the translation, from Moya Hassan, it is quite an event that it has at last appeared—thanks to the initiative of Walter Donohue of Faber & Faber. It contains many fascinating editorial notes, by Bambi Ballard, based on her scrutiny of the original drafts of Gance's remarkable script. She and I have carefully noted every scene that was shot, but has yet to be found, and every scene that was written, but never filmed.

Few scripts qualify as literature, but this has all the passion of the final film—and reads like a thrilling novel. (In case this sounds like a barefaced plug for

the book, I should point out that the tricolor on the cover has its colours the wrong way round!)

Yours faithfully,  
KEVIN BROWNLOW  
London NW3

## Third Man

SIR,—Paul Driver's article, *A Third Man Cento* (Winter 1989/90) was much appreciated by this reader. Such was the effectiveness of his writing, that when combined with the film's impact the accompanying stills were almost superfluous.

With respect to Carol Reed's narration at the beginning of the film, I would point out that Joseph Cotten's voice was used in Selznick's North American version, and the wording was suitably altered. Some other differences turn up too. Both versions appear on television over here.

Yours faithfully,  
HUGH K. BLACK  
London, Ontario

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BARRY ANTHONY is a freelance writer specialising in Victorian popular culture... PHIL CAVENDISH is a freelance writer with specialist knowledge of Polish film and translator of the *Decalogue* screenplays... PHILIP KEMP'S *Lethal Innocence*, a study of Alexander Mackendrick's work, will be published by Methuen in February 1991... GAVIN MILLAR is preparing a feature film, *On Foreign Ground*, based on an Argentinian novel, to begin shooting in September... LAWRENCE O'TOOLE is a freelance writer based in New York... JAMES PARK'S new book *British Film-making: the Lights that Failed* will be published in September... DAVID J. THOMPSON is an arts producer for BBC TV and co-editor of *Scorsese on Scorsese*... COLIN YOUNG is director of the National Film and Television School.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BARRY ANTHONY for illustrations for 'Shadows of Early Films'. ARTIFICIAL EYE for *Conte de Printemps, Notebook on Cities and Clothes*.

BARRANDOV FILM STUDIO for *The Ear*.

BLUE DOLPHIN for *McCabe and Mrs Miller*.

BBC TV for *The Decalogue, A Sense of Guilt, Blackeyes, A Woman of No Importance, Never Come Back*.

CHANNEL 4 for *thirtysomething*. CINEMA ET COMMUNICATION for *The Last Butterfly*.

CURZON for *Milou en Mai, Torrents of Spring, The Whales of August*.

EDITION MANFRED SALZGEBER for *The Death of Empedocles*.

FRONTLINE for *Lord of the Flies, Wild at Heart*.

GALA for *Colonel Redl*.

GRANADA TV for *Brideshead Revisited*.

GUILD for *Music Box*.

PHILIP KEMP for photograph of Alexander Mackendrick.

MOMI for photograph of Mutoscope.

NFA STILLS COLLECTION for *L'Atalante, The Anniversary, The Great Escape, Cowboy, Hud, Run for Cover, The Cowboys, A Matter of Life and Death, In Which We Serve, Ma Nuit chez Maud, Scenes from a Marriage*, photographs for 'When the Salesmen Walked In', photographs of Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, Maggie Brooks.

NFT for photograph of Krzysztof Kieslowski.

PALACE for *Chicago Joe and the Showgirl, Stormy Monday*.

PENTA FILM for *Voices of the Moon*.

RANK for *The Krays, Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

SANDS FILMS for *The Fool*.

SHIOBU FILM CO for *Full Moon in New York*.

SOVEREIGN PICTURES for *The Comfort of Strangers*.

SOVEXPORTFILM for *The Mother*.

20TH CENTURY FOX for photograph of Martin Ritt.

UNIFRANCE for *Une Affaire de Femmes*.

UIP for *Stanley and Iris*, photograph of the Ravetches.

WARNER BROS for *Dreams*.

WILLIAM W. WINBURN for photograph of Jules Feiffer.

For photographs of themselves, Troy Kennedy Martin, William Boyd, Michael Hirst, David Pirie, William Nicholson.

PRINTED BY The Jason Press Ltd, Hertford, England.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES: (4 issues) £9.50 including postage. Back issues, where available, at current price (£2.40 including postage and packing). Binders to hold two years' issues £7.00 (\$16), postage included.

PUBLICATION DATES: 1st January, April, July and October.

SOLE AGENTS FOR U.S.A.: Eastern News Distributors Inc.

SIGHT AND SOUND (USPS 496-040) is published quarterly by the British Film Institute.

Subscription price is \$15.80 per year. Second class postage paid at Sandusky, Ohio, and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster send change of address to Eastern News Distributors, 1671 East 16th St, Suite 176, Brooklyn, NY 11229-2901. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, 1130 Cleveland Rd, Sandusky, OH 44870.

# ON NOW

## ■ ROMUALD ET JULIETTE

(Gala)

Coline Serreau's not-so-starcrossed lovers are the ambitious young boss of a dairy combine (Daniel Auteuil) and the West Indian lady (Firminé Richard) who comes in nights to clean his Paris head office. Framed by devious colleagues, he holes up in her cramped high-rise apartment, while she sleuths round and unmasks the villains. But, reinstated, he feels life empty... Serreau's comedy merely rearranges social and racial stereotypes, rather than challenging them, and the ending—all glowing interracial harmony—may twinge even the sweetest tooth. It's done, however, with enough pace and good humour, laced with some sharp satirical jabs, to remain consistently enjoyable. And Firminé Richard, as the shrewd, sardonically self-reliant Juliette, is a delight to watch. (Pierre Vernier, Maxime Leroux.)

## ■ TIE ME UP! TIE ME DOWN!

(Enterprise)

Pedro Almodóvar is irresistibly drawn to awkward subjects and this is the most provocative to date. Ricki falls in love with Marina, an ex-porn movie actress, and proceeds to capture her and tie her up in her own apartment. She is torn between trying to escape and falling in love with him. It is a plot that seems designed to cause offence, but is really just another version of Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, shackled together in *The 39 Steps*. Almodóvar's theme is not the domination of women, but the strangeness of love and possessiveness. The performances are outstanding, Antonio Banderas is psychopathic and vulnerable, Victoria Abril fierce and funny. The American censors didn't see the joke and saddled the film with an X certificate, otherwise reserved for hardcore pornography and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. (Francisco Rabal, Loles Leon.)

## ■ WE'RE NO ANGELS

(UIP)

David Mamet's script reworks the 1955 original, retaining little but the title, the idea of convicts on the run and the theme of redemption. The result is a variation on Mamet's previous film, *Things Change*, with the two convicts stumbling into a Roman Catholic comedy as they disguise themselves as priests and take refuge in a monastery on the Canadian border. Director Neil Jordan gives the material a darker tinge, skilfully exploiting Robert De Niro's comic gifts and finding

a vulnerable, likeable, previously unsuspected Sean Penn. A seriously underrated comedy that nosedived at the American box office. (Demi Moore, Hoyt Axton, Bruno Kirby, Ray McAnally.)

## □ CLEAN AND SOBER

(Warner Bros)

Daryl Poynter (Michael Keaton), drug-addicted, debt-ridden, suspected of murder, joins a drug-rehabilitation programme to hide out. The film then narrows disappointingly into his sombre struggle for recovery. *An Officer and a Gentleman* for coke addicts. (Kathy Baker, Morgan Freeman, Tate Donovan; director, Glenn Gordon Caron.)

## □ I BOUGHT A VAMPIRE MOTORCYCLE

(Hobo)

An over-extended but likeable British entry in the barrel-scraping comedy-exploitation stakes. The title tells it all, but it's better worked out than most of its kind, making telling use of grimy Birmingham locations and enlivened with touches of effectively sick humour. (Neil Morrissey, Anthony Daniels, Michael Elphick; director, Dirk Campbell.)

## □ AN INNOCENT MAN

(Warner Bros)

An honest man receives a long sentence after being framed by two narcotics cops. With the help of an old lag he survives the brutal prison regime and then embarks on a thuggish revenge against his persecutors. Sadly undistinguished picture from Peter Yates. (Tom Selleck, F. Murray Abraham.)

## □ LIMIT UP

(Medusa)

Fusion of *Working Girl*, *Dealers* and *Dr Faustus* in which lowly stock-market functionary Nancy Allen, who longs to be a trader, shakes hands with Devil's agent Danitra Vance and is given the chance to get in the pit and shout numbers with the men. Unhappily laugh-free comedy based on the mistaken notion that trading soybeans is as exciting and cinematic as flying a fighterplane or being a cowboy. (Dean Stockwell, Ray Charles; director, Richard Martini.)

## □ LORD OF THE FLIES

(Palace)

Harry Hook follows up *The Kitchen Toto* with the difficult task of building a film entirely on the performances of young boys. The acting is variable and some of the simplicity of Golding's parable is lost in the updating and Americanising, but Hook has a wonderful eye for the strange, brutal world of the tropics. (Paul Balthazar Getty, Chris Furrh, Daniel Ripoli, Bob Peck.)

## □ LOVERBOY

(Columbia Tri-Star)

Director Joan Micklin Silver was more at home in the New York and the Jewish humour of *Crossing Delancey* than in the farcical register of this fantasy about a California college dropout involuntarily redeeming his prospects by being adopted as

a gigolo. Tiresome build-up, but some diverting knockabout later on. (Patrick Dempsey, Kate Jackson, Kirstie Alley, Carrie Fisher.)

## □ MAX, MON AMOUR

(Electric)

Outré triangular relationship between a Paris-based British diplomat, his wife and her simian lover affords some contrived comic business and satirical gestures which are not so much deadpan as just blank. Perhaps Buñuel might have made something of Jean-Claude Carrière's script. (Charlotte Rampling, Anthony Higgins; director, Nagisa Oshima.)

## □ MISS FIRECRACKER

(Rank)

Beth Henley's original play was comic and charmingly surreal. Thomas Schlamme's quite disastrous film version loses both qualities through plodding literalness and wastes a first-rate cast. (Scott Glenn, Holly Hunter, Tim Robbins, Mary Steenburgen.)

## □ MOON 44

(Medusa)

A would-be prison/fighterpilot movie set in outer space in which Michael Paré is sent to a mining colony on the 44th moon (of what we are not told) to discover who is stealing valuable equipment. Meanwhile a convict gang flies defensive spaceships in a corporate war, assisted by a group of teenage geniuses. Sweaty performances, sub-Ridley Scott sets; noisy but dull. (Lisa Eichhorn, Malcolm McDowell; director, Roland Emmerich.)

## □ THE PACKAGE

(Rank)

American right-wingers and Russian conservatives unite to assassinate Gorbachev and preserve the Cold War. Gene Hackman and his feisty ex-wife try to prevent them. Well acted but left high, dry and almost meaningless by the pace of change in Europe. (Joanna Cassidy, Tommy Lee Jones; director, Andrew Davis.)

## □ PAPER MASK

(Virgin)

An ambitious young hotel porter assumes the identity of a dead doctor and cons his way into a hospital job. Self-confident, ignorant, psychopathic, he has the ideal qualities for success. A terrific idea which could have been a dark, cynical chiller were it not so limply directed by Christopher Morahan. (Paul McGann, Amanda Donohoe.)

## □ THE PUNISHER

(Castle Premier)

A policeman whose family have been murdered by the Mafia now lives in the sewer and takes on organised crime single-handed. When the Japanese Yakuza muscle in, he patriotically takes them on too. Going where Schwarzenegger has lucratively gone before, strongman Dolph Lundgren is a surprisingly attractive performer; the film, though, is a risible mess. (Louis Gossett Jr, Jeroen Krabbe, Kim Miyori; director, Mark Goldblatt.)

## □ RE-ANIMATOR 2

(Medusa)

Announced as *Bride of Re-Animator*, in hopes, perhaps, of invoking the shade of Elsa Lanchester who breathed new life into Frankenstein, this turns out to be a disappointingly muddled and virtually plotless sequel. Messy effects and uniformly hysterical performances. (Bruce Abbott, Claude L. Jones; director, Brian Yuzna.)

## □ REUNION

(Rank)

An old Jew (Jason Robards) returns from America to Germany to find what has become of his childhood friendship with an aristocrat that was terminated by the latter's sympathy for Hitler. Stolidly scripted by Harold Pinter with a lame twist in the final seconds. (Christian Anholt, Samuel West; director, Jerry Schatzberg.)

## □ TRIUMPH OF THE SPIRIT

(Guild)

The true story of a Jewish-Greek boxer who survived in Auschwitz by engaging in bouts with the SS guards. Impressively filmed (within the actual walls of the concentration camp), well acted, especially by Willem Dafoe, as the boxer, but the title's optimism never begins to convince. (Edward James Olmos, Robert Loggia, Wendy Gazelle; director, Robert M. Young.)

## □ THE VANISHING

(Metro)

A young Dutch couple are on holiday in France when the wife suddenly disappears. The husband becomes fixated on solving the mystery; and the revelation of what he will finally do is one of the most terrifying moments of the film year. Wonderful Hitchcockian material, written by Tim Krabbe, directed by George Sluizer. (Bernard-Pierre Donnadieu, Gene Bervoets.)

## □ THE WITCHES

(Warner Bros)

An adaptation of Roald Dahl's fantasy about a small boy running up against child-hating witches (make-up courtesy of Jim Henson), and getting turned, for his trouble, into a talking mouse. Attractive visuals, lively surface; unremitting energy somewhat wearing. (Anjelica Huston, Mai Zetterling, Jansen Fisher; director, Nicolas Roeg.)

## □ A WOMAN ON THE ROOF

(Curzon)

Rum goings-on in former photographic studio, now a lodging house, in 1914 Stockholm: Anna, a forceful Austrian refugee, disrobes wide-eyed Linnea for her fairytale photographs, until farouche Willy appears to reveal a dangerous secret. A handsome but ultimately puzzling arabesque on, among other matters, the power and 'reality' of still photography: director, Carl-Gustaf (son of Sven) Nykvist. (Amanda Ooms, Helena Bergström, Stellan Skarsgård.)

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